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Pandora

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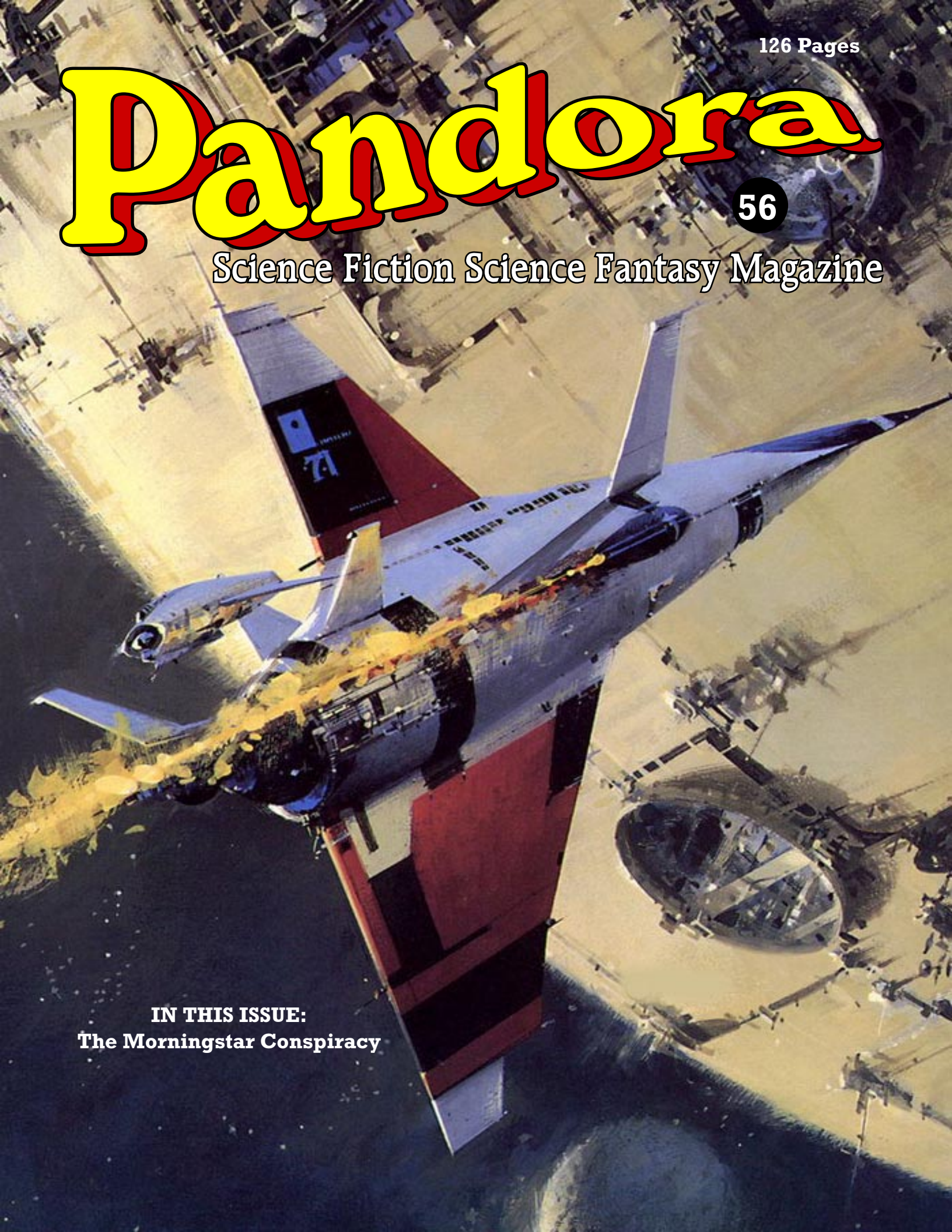
Science Fiction Science Fantasy Magazine



IN THIS ISSUE:
The Morningstar Conspiracy

Pandora

Science Fiction Science Fantasy Magazine

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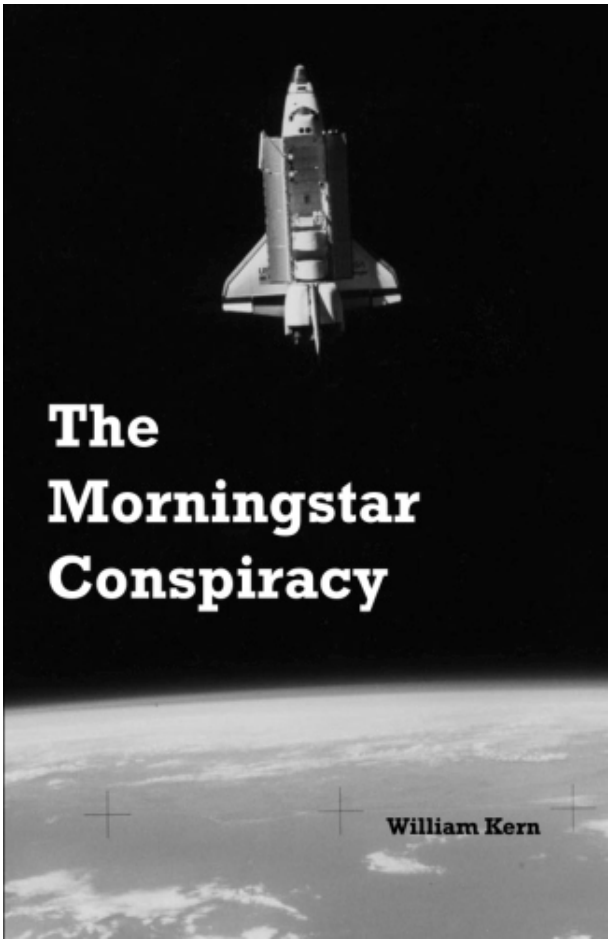

ONE

The blond haired man swung out of the black government sedan and walked quickly toward the porch. He was about six feet three inches tall, was impeccably dressed in a black three-piece suit with a white, button-down collar shirt, black tie, and black low-cut oxfords. His intense blue eyes scanned the house and yard in one swift glance as he stepped up onto the porch, shifted the briefcase he was carrying from his right hand to his left, and knocked on the door.

I waited until he'd knocked twice, pushed away from the computer, storing my thoughts about my manuscript, and walked over to see who he was.

"Richard Constable?" he asked, and after I nodded, he produced a Department of Intelligence and Counter Espionage identification card and introduced himself as Steve Dansforth with a slight, but noticeable, New England accent.

I swung the door open and waved him into the living room, allowed him to choose his own place to sit, and sat down beside the computer. He slid the briefcase onto the bar and eased onto the stool beside me.

"I'm sorry to have to bother you at home, Mister Constable," he said, "but we need your help in locating Roger Bentley." He paused, eyeing me carefully for a moment, noted my reaction, and continued. "Do you mind answering some questions about him?"

"Of course not," I responded, "if you mean the Roger Bentley I knew in San Diego, California, but I haven't seen him since I left there six months ago.

What's happened to him?"

"That's what we'd like to find out. He's vanished, and it seems he's taken some objects and classified documents with him. We want to find him and get those documents returned to the laboratory. It's quite important that we find him before someone else, someone from a foreign government, discovers he has the documents in his possession. You see what I mean?"

"Yeah, I believe you're trying to say he stole some secrets and you're afraid he might be trying to sell them to a foreign government."

He looked at me disdainfully for a moment, snapped open the briefcase, pulled out a stack of papers with a ragged dossier, and arranged them neatly on the bar.

The dossier had my name on it.

"Roger was working on a project, a radical, completely unique kind of energy source for the Aerospace Industry, The people for whom he works deal with sensitive government contracts from time to time, and this particular project is the most sensitive ever undertaken by this nation.

"If Roger has stolen the project, whether he intends to sell it to a foreign nation or not, we must find him and the documents before anyone else does. If he has been kidnapped, we must find those responsible for the act, and recover the project whether he is still alive or not."

He flipped open the dossier, ran a finger down the page, read briefly, and turned to me.

"How long have you known Mister Bentley?" he asked.

"Since 1965. About twenty years."

"What was he doing when you first met him?"

"He was a combat photographer in Vietnam."

"Where, specifically, in Vietnam?"

"Cam Ranh Bay."

"What were your duties at that time?"

I paused, wondering what my previous military duties had to do with finding Roger. I didn't mind answering questions that might help locate Roger, but I didn't think this question was appropriate so I gave the standard response.

"I was on temporary duty assignment from a Photo Support Group based in the Republic of the Philippines."

Dansforth looked up from the dossier, and his eyes narrowed slightly.

"What, specifically, was that assignment?"

"I'm not at liberty to discuss that, sir," I said simply,

"You can't tell me what you did in Vietnam?" he asked politely.

"No, I can't"

"Why not?"

"Because I don't think it's any of your business, that's why. Is that specific enough?"

He flipped through the dossier until he found my military history, then began to read:

"You were a member of a special reconnaissance group gathering data

about troop and supply movements along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. You were assigned to the Support Group in the Philippines but you spent the better part of three years in Vietnam, Kampuchea, Laos, and Thailand, gathering information which was disseminated to MAC-V, CIA, DIA, I-Corps, NRTSC, FICPAC, and other agencies and friendly forces who had interests in Vietnam and Southeast Asia. Shall I continue?"

I scowled at him and looked over his shoulder to see what other parts of me he had tucked away in the dossier, then looked back at him. When he was certain I wasn't going to answer his question, he continued.

"Your group conducted covert surveillance and intelligence gathering activities until it was deactivated and dispersed in 1968. That was February fourteenth to be exact.

"Roger Bentley, meanwhile, had returned to the Combat Camera Group at NAS North island and purchased a home on Coronado Island. He was discharged in 1966, applied for a job at Future Industries of America, and began working there in rune of that year.

"You were transferred to the Naval Aerospace Recovery Facility in El Centro, California where you remained until you were transferred to the Fleet Reserve in 1976. You kept in contact with Mister Bentley and visited him from time to time."

I had given up trying to look nonchalant by the time he had finished talking. It was obvious he had a wealth of information about me that even my immediate family had not known.

"Sir," I said, "if you have this information about me you must also know I'm not at liberty to discuss any of it. Since you're aware of that, I wonder why you even imagined that I would talk about it."

Dansforth leaned back in his stool and put his fingertips together. "I'm trying to establish your credibility as a source of information," he said, "because I need to know what you're willing to disclose and what you're determined to withhold. If you're uncomfortable with this arrangement, answering questions voluntarily, remember that we can easily get the necessary papers to question you as a material witness downtown. Would you prefer that?"

I stared at him with my jaws tight, shook my head.

"Fine. When was the last time you saw Mister Bentley?"

"July fifth, 1984."

"You seem very confident about that."

"I have an excellent memory."

"What was the nature of that visit?"

"I was leaving California to tour the United States and, since I figured it would be awhile before I saw him again, I went by his place to say good-bye."

"What did you talk about?"

"Our trips to Mexico, mutual friends; stuff like that."

"How did he act? Did he seem in good spirits?"

I thought back to that last meeting six months earlier. Roger had always

been a quiet person, not much given to a lot of emotion one way or the other. He had been preoccupied in a detached sort of way but I thought that was because I was leaving.

"He acted normal to me." I replied.

"He didn't seem upset about anything?"

"Not particularly. Only that I was leaving, I think."

He made a notation and shuffled down the pile of papers. "Did you correspond with him after you left?"

"Postcards, letters; a Christmas card." That was the truth.

"Did he ever respond?"

"No." Again, the truth.

"Did you think that was unusual?"

"Not really," I replied. "He probably didn't know where I was most of the time and, like I said before, he was a private kind of person. Quiet. He didn't write."

Actually, that wasn't quite the truth because I had wondered why Roger had never answered any of my letters. It was true that he couldn't possibly have known where I was at any given time, but he did have my Post Office box number and could have written; I would have received his letters sooner or later.

Dansforth watched me carefully with his left index finger pressed against his lips.

"You say you sent postcards," he said. "Name some of the places you were when you sent them, if you can remember?"

The logic of that was immediately obvious. Roger might have gone to one of those places thinking he might catch up with me.

"Well, let's see." I began, "I mailed the first one from Cape Foulweather in Oregon and another from Port Angeles, Washington. I spent about a month... ."

"Just a moment," Dansforth interrupted. "Are you saying you did not come directly to Florida by the southern route?"

"Right. I drove north through Oregon and Washington and then I headed east. I went all the way to Marathon, in the Keys, before I came back to Melrose."

Dansforth pursed his lips and exhaled slowly. "How many postcards do you think you sent Mister Bentley during your trip?"

"Probably a dozen, but I also wrote several letters."

"Okay," he said, "Do you remember where you were when you sent the letters or cards?"

"I sent the first letter from Standish. That's up near Susanville. I stayed at a rest area there for a day and I wrote the first letter then. I was only travelling about two hundred miles a day when I was on the road and sometimes I spent two or three days in the same place. Often I stayed as long as two weeks. I stayed on a logging road near Mammouth Lake for two days before I went to Standish, so you can see I wasn't going very far or very fast at any one time."

Dansforth sat quietly, making notations in the margins of the dossier as I began to recount my trip across the

United States.

"I drove north on highway 395 to Lakeview, Oregon and stopped at a nice city park there to fix lunch, then drove to Paisley, Oregon.

"I stopped at a Ranger Station to ask where I might spend the night and they directed me to Coffee Pot Flats on the Chewaucan River. I stayed there for three days taking pictures and writing in my journal.

"I then drove to La Pine, Oregon to see an old gypsy and later that afternoon I drove to Bend and took highway 20 to Suttle Lake near the headwaters of the Metolius River. I stayed the night and the next day I drove about an hour to a place called Lost Lake. It was so perfect I stayed for a week. I wrote another letter and mailed it in Corvallis.

"From there I drove to Newport on the coast and took 101 north. I stopped at Cape Foulweather and got a dozen postcards, one of which I sent to Roger.

"I left at twenty after ten and drove to Beaver where I stayed five days at Beaver Creek. I got there on the afternoon of the eighteenth of August and left on the morning of the twenty-third."

I waited for him to write a page of notes before continuing the story. It took two hours, covering a distance of: over five thousand miles and a time span of nearly six months. He listened quietly, interrupting only when he wanted to read through parts of the dossier or to ask me a question to clarify some point.

When I had finished he looked at his watch and announced that it was time for some lunch. It was ten after twelve.

"How would you like to drive into Gainesville with me to have lunch?" he asked.

"Seems like a long way to go for lunch. There are some nice places here in Melrose. We could have lunch right here if you trust my cooking."

Agent Dansforth apparently enjoyed the privilege of giving specific orders or offering suggestions which he expected to be accepted without question, and was visibly annoyed when I didn't accept his invitation.

He shuffled the papers and put them neatly into their separate folders without looking at me. I sat quietly and waited for him to tell me what to do next. He put all the folders in his briefcase, locked it, and placed it on the floor beside his right foot.

"I want to go to Gainesville because I have things to do while I am there, and I want to explain further why you are involved. I thought we could solve several problems at one time. Is there any specific reason you don't want to go to Gainesville?"

"Not particularly. I just think it's too far to go to have lunch, but if you have things to do that can't wait, I'll go with you. I don't care one way or the other where we go as long I can help you find out what happened to Roger."

He stood and picked up the briefcase, waited until I got my peacoat from the closet, and led the way out to the agency sedan.

After we were buckled in, he fired up the engine and got back on the county road toward Gainesville. He

pulled a crumpled pack of Salems from his coat pocket and offered one to me, but I shook my head and held up my pack of Marlboros. He lit his Salem, left it dangling from his lip, then loosened his tie and the top button of his shirt, rubbed his neck, and got comfortable in the seat, staring intently at the road. After a couple of minutes he smiled.

"How can you remember all those details?" he asked. "Where you were on certain dates? Where you were when you wrote or mailed letters? Who you talked to? What highways you took?"

"I kept a log book, a diary. Besides, that's what the government trained me to do. I'm good at it."

"As a matter of fact, you are," he replied. "Why aren't you working for some intelligence outfit?"

"Two reasons. Number one: despite what the government says to the contrary, they do not hire people my age. I'll be forty-eight next September. Number two: —this is probably the most important reason—I had enough of it for twenty years. I'm retired. I quit. I want no more of it."

"Oh, you're still gathering information, it's just for another purpose. By the way, what is the purpose?"

"I'm writing a book about the trip."

He smiled and nodded as if he had guessed it. "You have what's called a photographic memory."

With that, he fell silent again and, since I had nothing to add to his comment, I just sat and smoked my cigarette.

I wondered where Roger had gone. He had called me briefly in mid-December, told me he was taking a Christmas vacation and wondered if he could come to visit me. He had never arrived. That really wasn't unusual for him. I had assumed he had changed his mind and gone elsewhere but I wondered and worried about it for days. I had called his home in San Diego but had never received an answer and, sooner or later, I knew all that was going to come up if Dansforth was as thorough as I thought he was.

I really didn't know much about Roger's work but I did know he worked for a government think tank and the projects were probably highly classified. I deduced that not from what he had told me, but from what he had never told me. When a responsible person is in that kind of business he often goes to great lengths to avoid discussing it. I had done the same thing for twenty years and my family had never known. He had never told me and I had never asked. Friends don't pin each other down with those kinds of questions.

I had sensed from time to time over the years that he was not always happy about what he was doing because he would brood and seem preoccupied. Maybe I was wrong about that. Maybe he was just wishing he had more time to go surf-sailing in Mexico or maybe, like everyone else, he had been at the same job too long and needed a change.

I could think of nothing that would give me a clue to where he might have gone, so I began to wonder about my part in this situation. Dansforth had asked some questions that probed my

own background. He knew my entire military history and probably knew every detail of my childhood as well. Even if the military part was no longer classified, he brought up things I didn't want to think about. But what had all this to do with me other than that I was Roger's friend? Other people, his colleagues certainly, or Dansforth's agency, were bound to know more about him than I, especially since I hadn't even seen him or heard from him in over six months.

I looked at Dansforth. He was lost in his own thoughts for the moment, planning, I imagined, the next round of questions he was going to ask after he'd bought my lunch. I wondered idly if he thought he had enough agents scattered around the country to look for Roger in all the places I'd named while I was telling him where I'd been for the last six months.

It had taken me half a year to make my trip, and if they thought they could search the same route and find him in less time than that, they were better than I gave them credit for. Besides, knowing Roger as I did, I knew he could stay ten steps ahead of them, stay hidden as long as he wanted, and they would never find him if he didn't want them to.

If time was as important an element as Dansforth had led me to believe, I couldn't help but think they were going about this all wrong.

I put my arm over the seat and turned toward him. "I haven't figured out what any of this has to do with me, Dansforth," I said. "I haven't seen Roger since I left San Diego, and couldn't tell you where he is now if my life depended on it."

"We have to begin somewhere, don't we?" He smiled briefly and looked at me sideways.

"Does that mean you think I know something I'm not telling you?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. I'll know after we talk more."

"But until this morning, I protested, "I didn't even know he was missing. What could I know when I haven't seen him for six months?"

"You admit you wrote him several letters. You also state that he didn't respond. That may or may not be true."

"It's true."

"I have only your word for that and at the moment it isn't good enough. In any event, you may have forgotten something, overlooked an important detail. Do you see what I mean? Additional questioning might reveal it." He studied me for a moment, then turned his attention to the road. Presently he spoke again.

"I'll tell you the truth, Mister Constable, I haven't quite got you figured out yet. I'm impressed with your remarkable memory. You're obviously well educated and intelligent, yet you spend your time fishing or reading, or writing your book. You could be working for an organization that could use your talents but you prefer to spend your time alone. Why is that, I wonder?"

"Because other people, like the ones you work for, used my talents until they sucked me dry. The government, an ex-wife, the public, now you. Yes, I

prefer to spend my time with myself right now because I don't make impossible demands of myself, I'm decent company, and because I'm sick to death of anthill living. Nothing to wonder about. If you had a choice between fishing and reading, and what you are doing here today, which would you choose?"

"I'd probably go fishing for a day, maybe two, but I wouldn't stay out for six months or more."

"Well, that's one difference between us then," I said. "I can stay out forever."

"You enjoyed Vietnam, I imagine."

"What?"

"You enjoyed what you were doing in Vietnam, in Southeast Asia." He said it as if it were a matter of fact.

"I hated it!"

"Oh, ho!" He blew a cloud of smoke toward the windshield. "Why, then, did you stay for two consecutive tours when you could have returned to the States after eighteen months?"

"Because at the end of the first eighteen months I wasn't close enough to civilization to get the correct time of day, let alone request a transfer Stateside."

"Okay, I'll buy that. But I read the dossier, remember? You have a perfect military record. No Captain's masts, you got your promotions at about the right time, got along well with your peers, your superiors, and all the civilians you worked with.

"That's pretty remarkable in itself, but your record of service while you were in Vietnam impresses me more. I know that you were the only known survivor of a long range patrol along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and that you made it back from Dalat to Cam Ranh with a lot of important intelligence information, when it might have been easier for you to give up and allow yourself to be captured. That takes considerable dedication and determination, seems to me."

"That's because you weren't there, Dansforth. Now, if you'll stop the car, I'll walk back home, because I'm tired of hearing crap from you."

He jerked his head toward me, astonished that I would challenge him, and held up a hand. "Hey, wait," he said. "I didn't mean to offend you. If you don't want to talk about it, we won't talk about it. Okay?"

I folded my arms across my chest and stared out the window.

"Don't try to jack me around, Dansforth. I've met people like you everywhere I've been. There are a thousand carbon copies of you all over the world. Your whole goal in life is to see how deep you can stick the knife in anyone who isn't in your organization.

"If you want to find Roger, fine. I'll do what I can to help, but let's get to it, for Christ's sake, or take me the hell home. I've got better things to do than play games with you."

He clenched his teeth and puffed, rocked back and forth in the seat with his eyes wide. "Okay," he said after awhile. "Tell me if you ever talked to Roger on the phone."

"You already know I did or you wouldn't ask. He called just before

Christmas and said he'd like to come visit for the holidays."

"What did you tell him?"

"I said sure."

"Did he mention or indicate that he might not return to San Diego?"

"No."

"When did he say he would arrive?"

"Saturday, the twenty-second."

"Did he, in fact, arrive?"

"No."

"What did you do?"

"I called his home but got no answer."

"Did you try again?"

"No."

He tapped his teeth with a thumbnail and narrowed his eyes, framing another question.

"Do you know where Mister Bentley worked?"

"At a research lab."

"Do you know what he did there?"

"Something about energy cells?" I asked it as a question. He stared at me intently, his eyes searching for more than I had given him.

"What do you know of Future Industries of America?"

"Not much. Roger didn't tell me what he did and I never asked. The best I can guess is that it's a high tech research lab with a lot of highly sensitive government contracts."

Dansforth nodded. "Do you know anything about any of the projects Roger worked on?"

"I just explained he never told me, and I never asked. I was in the intelligence gathering business, remember? I figure it was none of my business."

We were getting into Gainesville traffic, and Dansforth horsed the sedan into a line of cars turning onto Thirteenth Street, then headed north with the noon crowd. At the next stoplight, he took his hands from the wheel and rubbed his palms together, then leaned forward slightly and stared at me until the light turned green.

"Time to go," I said, nodding toward the light.

"I'm going to tell you something, Richard, that you may not believe, and I'm going to tell you because I have a gut feeling you've been honest with me about Roger; about not knowing where he is."

I mashed out the Marlboro while Dansforth swung the sedan out of traffic and into the parking lot at Jimmy's Restaurant. He seemed nervous and agitated as he parked the car and shut off the engine.

"Okay," he said, "everything else is off the record. No more official questions."

"A refreshing departure from the normal routine."

"Whatever. Let's have some lunch." He got his briefcase off the floor and got out, stretching the kinks out of his back, led the way to the rear of the car, and I idled nearby while he locked the briefcase in the trunk, then followed him to the restaurant.

After we were seated, he slid over toward me and held out his hands in a

gesture of futility.

"When we got your name I thought we had our first hot lead, but after talking to you today I'm certain you don't know anything about this." He dropped his hands and tapped his knuckles on the table nervously.

"I'm going to trust that you will not repeat what I'm going to tell you. It is the most highly classified secret in this nation right now, and if the wrong people find out what we've lost, there'll be hell to pay for the next thousand generations."

I shook my head and sighed. "Don't get mysterious with me, Dansforth; tell me what's on your mind."

The waitress came for our orders and we both leaned on the table quietly until she left. Dansforth glanced around the room as if he expected someone to be eavesdropping on his enlightening information, then he worked his fingers together tightly and cleared his throat.

"About ten years ago, when it became evident that this nation was growing more dependent on foreign oil sources that might dry up in the event of a war, someone in the government, or someone very savvy, very wealthy, contacted Roger Bentley at Future Industries and asked if he thought anyone could develop an engine that would not use fossil fuels or nuclear energy as a power source. There was a lot of covert activity, a lot of unauthorized funding, diversion of money, and a lot of secret meetings going on for a long time before they finally got Roger to agree to the project.

"Someone must have known Roger could come up with a workable engine of some kind. Maybe they had been watching him or maybe they had people inside who reported on his successes in other projects.

"At any rate, a few billion dollars suddenly appeared and the project began, disguised as research for the Strategic Defense Initiative."

"Star Wars laser guns."

"Right. To this day, I'm convinced no administrator at Future Industries knows that Roger and a few others were working on this incredible new engine. I'm also certain that only the people who commissioned him to work on the project are aware of the magnitude of his discovery."

He looked around the room again, and leaned forward with his face a foot from mine.

"This engine, this, this thing he built was supposed to free us from our need to buy foreign oil, you see. But as soon as the people in Washington found out what he'd created, they were so astonished, so surprised, so certain they could use it as a weapon, that they planted a bunch of their own people around him to make sure the secret wouldn't be leaked to the outside."

Our dinner arrived and there was some shifting around while the waitress pushed plates and smiled at us. There was an awkward silence until she left, then Dansforth cleared his throat and continued.

"Someone, we don't know who, figured out what was going on, and man-

aged to gel some of the information out of the plant. There was a big panic when the information appeared in Europe and security was tightened. As far as we know, that put an end to the compromise, but now we have a hostile government, or governments, looking over our shoulders, trying to figure out what we have."

I worked on my ham and eggs for awhile, then looked at him.

"So what do we have?"

"We have an engine, Richard, that doesn't use fossil fuel, doesn't use nuclear fuel, is not radioactive, has no moving parts, will run at full power for eternity, and you can hold it in one hand." He put his fork down carefully beside his plate and slouched in the booth.

I squinted one eye at him skeptically and he shook his head sadly.

"That's the same reaction we get from anyone who has heard about the project," he said, "but the engine does exist. At least it did until a couple of weeks ago, until Roger and the engine disappeared."

"Do you think he's the one who was leaking the information to the foreign government?"

"No, but he may have discovered a conspiracy, if you will, to steal the project. Maybe he discovered the project had been infiltrated by hostile foreign agents, and took it to prevent them from stealing it."

"Any evidence of a spy?"

"Ah, Richard," he sighed, "any spy in this project would be the best man available for the job and would have perfect credentials. If there is a foreign agent inside the project it might take us years to weasel him out, and we don't have the time. We have to find Roger and that engine before someone else figures out where he is. God pity us if we don't."

I finished my meal and waved the waitress over for a refill of coffee, noticed that Dansforth had hardly touched his steak. He was staring into the space between the table and the door with expressionless eyes.

"Tell me something, Dansforth," I said after awhile.

He nodded.

"I know you've been keeping an eye on me for awhile or you wouldn't have all that information out there in the trunk of your car, but what makes you think I know where he is?"

Dansforth smiled weakly and closed his eyes. "Because Roger called you from his office at Future Industries, and all the calls are recorded on a computer. We traced the number to you, and because you had known him since Vietnam, longer than anyone except his immediate family, we figured he'd come here."

"And you've come here to intercept him if he shows up?"

"More to the point, I've come to protect the project. If the wrong person gets his hands on that engine they're going to take all our marbles away from us, Richard. This thing could destroy society as we know it, could enslave entire nations overnight, and we'll be power-

less to stop them. They can cut off our oil supplies, our food supplies, and bring our industry to a standstill, then simply walk in and take over.

"If we don't find that engine," he finished with a futile sigh, "humankind has no future."

TWO

Dansforth drove me home at two o'clock that afternoon and I stood at the window thinking about what he'd told me. For years we'd been warned of the dangers of being dependent on foreign sources for petroleum but not much had been done about changing that, except superficially.

There had been some feeble attempts to use solar energy, and wind energy, and water power, and there had been that big flap about developing gasohol as an alternative to fossil fuels but everyone knew none of those would be a satisfactory long-term solution to the problem.

Aircraft, by virtue of their design requirements, had to use fossil fuels, and even though ships could be designed and built to use nuclear energy to produce steam to drive their turbines, they were expensive to build and, because they would be prime targets during a war, were considered dangerous. Nuclear power plants, built to generate electricity, produced waste products that would remain radioactive for millions of years and were considered by many to be the greatest threat to life on this planet. Whether they were right or wrong is of no consequence; nuclear energy clearly could not replace oil as a source of power in a world where almost everything had been built to be driven by fossil fuels.

Something new and radical had to be developed. While most research Labs were tinkering with ways to better use existing fuels, Roger Bentley had quietly created a primary power source which had acquired the name, "Cascade Generator". It was, Agent Dansforth explained, a self-contained, noncombustible, nonradioactive, self-regenerating engine. It was, in all respects, a perfect, perpetual power source designed to propel the Stealth aircraft and aerospace vehicles. It had no moving parts and its useful life was estimated to extend into eternity. The prototype had been about the size of an ink bottle and had been used to propel a modified Tomahawk Cruise Missile. Not only had it been the source of propulsion, it had generated all the electrical power for the avionics as well.

On paper, a Cascade Generator, the size of a shirt button, was estimated to be capable of producing enough energy to power up an average sized single family dwelling with an unfluctuating 110-120 volts of alternating current until the universe ceased to exist. Other versions of the same generator could be attached directly to the differential of an automobile and would propel it forever. No gas tank—hence, no gas, no battery, no monster engine spewing toxic fumes, no transmission, no internal parts to seize, break, or wear out.

An engine the size of a three pound

tin of coffee could propel the Navy's largest carrier indefinitely. The same generator could propel the Stealth aircraft forever and do it without the noise and detectable heat of a turbofan. With only the slightest of modifications, the same engine could hurtle a spaceship to the stars, releasing humankind from this island Earth.

Dansforth had elaborated on some of the uses for the generator and had probably understated many of the other potential uses. Certainly, if the Cascade Generator was real, anyone who had it could fairly well control the world, not only world economy but the nations of people as well. What he told me was chilling enough; what he hadn't told me was terrifying. The military implications were staggering, but I was thinking of something else.

If this machine, this engine, this prime source of power, could be mass-produced and used to do even half the things it purportedly could do, it would put ninety percent of the work force on permanent unemployment.

There would be no more oil industry because there would no longer be a need for petroleum. There would be no turbine engines, no internal combustion engines, no more batteries, no transmissions, no public utilities companies, no nuclear engines or reactors, not a single tire company—who needs tires on a vehicle that can hover forever?—No oil fired furnaces, no industry to manufacture things like electrical outlets, junction boxes, fuses, circuit breakers, relays, or switches.

Of course, the Cascade Generator had some good qualities. No more power failures, ever. Aircraft would never crash. If anything went wrong they could be lowered gently to the ground and everyone would simply walk away unharmed. Ships would never have to refuel at sea. Anyone who has ever served in a warship could appreciate that. Hospitals would never be without power. Food could be grown underground. Hell, the whole of humankind could live underground with that kind of energy available, leaving the entire surface of the planet to the production of food. We could explore the universe, and come back when we got hungry.

There were probably hundreds of uses for the generator that I couldn't even imagine but I was too busy thinking of that ninety percent unemployment rate to figure out what they might be.

The more I thought about it, the more I felt it was all a hoax. Engineers somewhere were undoubtedly working on such an engine, but if it had already been built, who in their right mind would purposely throw the world into the kind of chaos that production of the engine had the potential to do? It would be the most self-destructive act anyone could perform.

If Roger had built such a machine, he had taken it precisely because he had recognized its dangers. Any oil producing nation would suppress it or destroy it completely, and erase any trace of it, including all those who had conjured it into existence.

I couldn't think of a single industry that would want to see it mass-produced and I couldn't think of a single person who would want one in their car. In the first place, no one would be able to buy one since few people would have jobs. Imagine for a moment how many parts could be left off a combine sailing gently and silently across a field of Kansas wheat. Think how many parts could be eliminated from an automobile that could hover exactly ten inches above the ground or snow or water and could turn on its own central axis by activating little button-size thrusters fore and aft. Imagine if that vehicle could not only skim above a highway but could also fly, or dive beneath the ocean. Imagine if that generator could not only propel a vehicle down the highway or across pastures and over cities, but could also drive the machinery to produce a breathable atmosphere and at the same time produce all the electricity needed to power onboard computers, grow food, and recycle water.

Think of any vehicle, automobile, aircraft, surface ship, submarine, or what have you, with no engines, no fuel tanks, no fuel, no tires, no batteries, no drive shafts or transmissions, no brakes, no steering wheels, no axles or springs or shock absorbers, no wires or starters or alternators, not even instruments, and then imagine how many people would be out of work if such a machine were ever produced in great numbers.

True, over a period of several lifetimes, certain industries could be slowly phased out and new generations of workers could be educated to produce other parts for the generator, but where does one begin such a project? Who would decide which industry fell first? Which group of stockholders would be forced into bankruptcy first? What would the government or private industry do with the unemployed multitudes who once produced engines and tires, automobiles and aircraft, welded steel into ships? What would anyone do with the millions, perhaps billions, of people who make their living by drilling for oil, processing oil, transporting oil, trading in oil commodities, selling oil and gasoline? The entire world economy would collapse overnight.

So the Cascade Generator wasn't the miracle everyone had hoped it would be. As badly as the world needed it, it was useless.

Except as a weapon.

Anyone who had it could literally rule the world. All they would have to do would be demand and the world would respond. The mere threat to introduce the generator onto the market, even in limited quantities, would bring the world's most powerful industries to their collective knees.

What a shame. I shivered involuntarily and got up to fix some coffee. As badly as I wanted Roger to be safe, I hoped Dansforth found him before he found me. I really didn't know what I would do if he showed up. I wouldn't want to turn him over to an organization like the one Dansforth represented. I could hide him for awhile but sooner or later, I knew, they would run him down and when they got him they would get

me, too. The worst part was it might not be our side that found him. Or maybe the worst part would be that anyone found him. I wasn't convinced our government could handle a situation like this better than anyone else's. Power is power. Our government might have purer motives but absolute world control, overnight, guaranteed, might be frighteningly attractive to even the most benevolent world leader. Tell me what oil producing nation would refuse to reduce the price of its crude oil when the customer held that kind of sword. On the other hand, what nation would refuse to pay any price for oil when the seller held the same sword?

These are the kinds of thoughts that crashed around inside my head that warm day in January. I drank two pots of coffee and smoked a pack of Marlboros while I paced from one end of the room to the other. Dansforth had probably been conservative when he had suggested that hundreds of people wanted what Roger had. Everyone in the world wanted what he had even if they didn't know it, and hundreds, perhaps thousands, would gladly kill him if they knew what kind of monster was hiding in the box.

Dansforth was a clever man and I was beginning to hate him as the day wore on. I had been told just enough to make me think. I was worried about Roger out there with a lot of very evil people after him. Dansforth had made a big point of letting me know he was giving me classified information, but all that was just so much bull. I knew that as soon as he had told me. If I wasn't supposed to know about the generator, I wouldn't know. It was as simple as that. Dansforth had told me exactly what he had been instructed to reveal. The questioning earlier in the day had to be a set up for something else. The classified information might have been lies, or part of it at least. The whole thing might be an elaborate hoax staged for some political purpose beyond my understanding. It wouldn't be the first time our government leaked information about a secret project to gain some leverage at the bargaining tables.

I didn't trust Dansforth. I had worked with his colleagues before and knew that they were not above sacrificing a hundred or so lives if it suited their purposes. All this had been much too easy, too quickly done. I was made aware of very sensitive information when I had no right to know it. If "Need To Know" applied to anything I had ever seen or heard, it certainly applied in this case. To let me, an outsider, in on such an obviously highly classified project was a violation of the rules, and Dansforth and his kind always played by the rules.

So why was I in? I found it difficult to believe that all the police forces and secret service organizations in the world could not find one man with a suitcase full of classified documents. I wasn't going to flatter myself into believing I could do something they collectively could not. But Dansforth had recruited me and had done it with little subtlery, at that. He had tried to appeal to my ego by saying that I had done a superb job in Vietnam. But he knew as well as I that my military assignments in

Vietnam did not qualify me as a spy, a secret agent, except in the broadest meaning of the term. This was international subterfuge, not the surveillance of a specifically marked military target, and the only thing they had in common were high stakes and the fact that the penalty for a miscalculation was instant death.

Yet, here I was, included in a scenario in which I had no legitimate part. I was an extra. Somehow they were expecting me to make a move that would lead them to the next scene, whatever that was.

I should have been on the phone calling everyone I knew in California so I didn't do that. I felt certain Dansforth had had my telephone tapped while he was detaining me in town. The questioning session had been a humbug, and the extra time he had kept me at the restaurant was probably insurance so his people would have time to finish wiring my house. Like I said before, I didn't trust him.

My first instinct was to call Roger, which is probably what they expected me to do. Would there be any harm in that? If what Dansforth had told me was true, Roger's telephone was tapped and mine probably was, too. But wouldn't it be natural for me to call and find out first hand if this was all a hoax? Certainly, but if I did call it would be tantamount to admitting that I believed what I had been told and I really wasn't ready for that yet. I had to think this over for awhile and try to figure out why Dansforth had dragged me into the middle of it. Something about it smelled.

Any time I wanted to think and clear the dust out of the attic, I went fishing.

Half an hour later I was pulling my old ten foot aluminum boat out of the bed of my pickup truck at the Santa Fe Lake Park boat ramp. I hoisted it canoe style over my shoulders and walked it down to the water, let the bow down and walked around the boat, spinning it, then slid it into the water. As I walked back to the truck to get the outboard a car cruised in and made a turn around the area, then left. I watched it go then loaded the boat and shoved off, eased out through the canal and into the bay, throttled up and headed out as near the middle of the lake as I could. I shut off the engine and let the boat glide to an easy drifting. The silence crashed down on me and then was swallowed up by the expanse of the lake. I broke out my fishing gear and hung it over the side then slid down between the aft and midships thwarts, pulled my hat down over my eyes, and let my mind wander through the events that had occurred since Dansforth had arrived in the sedan.

No one had called before Dansforth drove to the house, so I had to believe someone had been watching me for awhile, because he knew I'd be there. He also seemed reasonably certain I'd agree to answer his questions about Roger and about my own life for the past six months. Then, after claiming the project was the most closely guarded secret in history, he candidly revealed the whole story to me, and that alone made me doubt its authenticity.

On the way home, he'd told me that

Roger had apparently spent some time altering the computer tapes so the generator could not be duplicated, and had placed an exact duplicate dummy generator in the vault so it had been weeks before anyone could verify that what they had was junk.

But he'd also told me they knew the same day Roger left that something was wrong because all the technical manuals were missing. Evidently Roger had no way of altering them and he couldn't leave them behind. I wondered about that. He must have had months or years to prepare for the day he would grab everything and run. If he took the time to foul up the computer tapes and have a dummy generator made, why didn't he have phony technical manuals printed that jibed with the computer tapes? If he had, he might have covered his tracks for months.

Maybe he hadn't had time because he had to move up his departure date for some reason.

I had no idea what state of mind he had been in or what kind of pressures he had been under during the months before he made his move. Certainly all the materials would have to be checked in and out of the vault, signed for and verified by others if the project was as sensitive as Dansforth had led me to believe. But was there only one set of technical manuals? Were there no copies tucked away somewhere? Had they not duplicated the computer tapes as backups in case something happened to the originals?

Possibly, but it seemed more like a flaw in Dansforth's story than anything else. Had he slipped up in telling me the story or had he planned it that way to give me something to think about?

I opted for the latter. I had known some of his colleagues to make some stupid mistakes, but I was convinced Dansforth was not stupid and would not make an error like that unless he planned it that way from the beginning.

But that brought me back to why. Why lure me into this mess? Until I figured that out I wasn't going to do anything. If I dragged my feet long enough and acted unconcerned Dansforth might be forced to show his hand.

I sat bolt upright! What was I thinking? I didn't want to be a part of this even though Dansforth had already recruited me. There was something here that smelled to high heaven and I suddenly had visions of me acting as an unwitting dupe in some sort of incredible power play. There was no logical sequence to any of it and I felt as if I had lust arrived in the middle of a Kubrek movie. I decided to do nothing more than I had been doing for six months and forget the whole thing.

It had already been late when I launched the boat and now it was getting dark and cold. I recovered my fishing gear, fired up the Evinrude, pulled my jacket tight around my neck, and headed in. On the way back I passed a small sailboat beating downwind for the opposite shore. Roger had a sailboat. I wondered idly if it was still in his garage in Coronado. Oh, we'd had some times in that boat, sailing across the bay un-

der the Coronado Bridge to Anthony's for fish dinner and back again tired and sleepy full of beer. "Wherever you are, pal," I thought, "I hope you're safe."

I crashed around in the dark getting the boat into the bed of the truck, then headed home. As I passed the Lake Area Bank a set of headlights blinked on and a car pulled out of the lot and turned in behind me. Whoever it was followed me home, but when I turned into my driveway they continued south down the county road. It was the same car that had made a tour of the boat ramp while I was launching my boat. I thought about calling Dansforth the next day and asking him about it but decided against it because I didn't want him to know I was aware of the tail. Could be they were expecting Roger to show up and just wanted to be around when he did. On the other hand, they could be watching me to see what kind of moves I was going to make now that I was a participant in their game. Either way, I didn't like it.

It was really too late to have a heavy meal by the time I got everything stowed so I fixed myself a sandwich and a glass of milk and put them on the coffee table, then went into the bedroom and got my .30 caliber carbine and the cleaning kit out of the closet. I oiled and cleaned the piece while I ate, then carefully polished thirty-one rounds, loaded them into the clip and snapped it into the receiver. I jerked the butt up to my shoulder a couple of times and sighted down the barrel, blew some dust motes from the sights, wiped the piece down with a soft cloth, and put it away.

"Be prepared," I kept saying. "Be prepared."

I showered and went to bed at eight, but lay awake in the darkness listening to the sounds of the house, trying to put the whole bizarre thing together in my mind. When I did sleep it was very lightly. I knew I was asleep but I was also aware of everything that was happening around the house. I conjured up visions of Roger altering the computer tapes and substituting the dummy generator for the real one.

Where had he gotten the dummy? How had he made it without anyone knowing? How had he altered the tapes without being detected? Was the project so simple that he could make the changes in a few minutes and then just walk away? Or was the project so complex that subtle changes over a period of time simply couldn't be detected, even by those closest to the project? How did he get out of the building with a briefcase full of technical manuals and the generator? If his car was still in his garage, as Dansforth had told me, how had he gotten to work that day, unless he went home before he disappeared? If he had ridden with someone else where had they taken him and why had they not volunteered some information?

Why had he booked a flight and then not taken it? Why had he called me and not arrived as he said he would? Why had he taken the generator in the first place? Could another person have taken the generator and made it appear as if Roger had done it? Had anything been stolen at all? Did the fantastic engine even exist?

I tossed and groaned all night, picking the pieces apart and rearranging them over and over, trying to make sense of the picture it made. It was no use; too many pieces were missing. I kept telling myself to let it go, get a good night's sleep, and think about it in the morning, but the more I did that, the more the thoughts would flood in on my mind. Some time in the early hours of the morning my half sleeping, half awake mind shut down and I slept.

I woke at ten after nine the next morning with a mental hangover and stumbled out of bed, got cleaned up and dressed, then went down to the gas station to use the pay phone. I made a long-distance call to San Diego and after a couple of rings a happy little female voice answered.

"Hello, Brandy, this is Richard," I said.

"You rat!" she cried, "where are you?"

"I'm in Florida. I need...."

"What are you doing in Florida?" she interrupted. "Last time I heard, you were on your way to Canada."

"I got lost. Look, Brandy, I need a favor. Do you remember Roger Bentley, the guy we went to Mexico with last year?"

"Yes."

"Okay, well, I haven't heard from him for about six months and I was wondering if something might have happened to him. Do me a favor and see if you can find out anything about him."

There was a long silence on the other end of the line.

"You there?" I asked.

"I'm still here but I don't know why. You want me to check all around town to find out where Roger is? Why don't you just call his home?"

"He isn't there."

"How do you know? Have you tried to call?"

"No, but I've been informed that he isn't there."

"By whom?"

"Never mind. Will you do it? It's a matter of life or death."

"If you hadn't jumped up and left San Diego without telling anyone you could be doing this yourself." She paused a moment. "If I remember correctly that was a matter of life or death, too."

"I'll try to explain that someday, Brandy. Really, I will. Will you do it?"

She sighed. "I'll do what I can. Why do I do these things for you?"

"Because you're precious, Brandy. I'll make it up to you."

"Oh, hey, you don't owe me anything. Just the last six months. Shall I call you back?"

"No. I think my phone is bugged and someone might be looking at my mail so don't call or write to me at the house."

"Oh, how very convenient."

"I'm serious, Brandy. I'll call you back in a couple of days if I don't get bogged down here."

"What have you got yourself into?"

"Don't ask."

She asked for my address and I gave it to her after getting her promise not to write, then hung up. On the way back to

the truck I saw the car that had followed me home the previous night parked across the street. Two men sat in the front seat trying to look disinterested.

Well, okay, I was in.

So what?

THREE

I spent the rest of the day working on my book but I had a lot of trouble concentrating. I was thinking about Brandy.

Talking to her had brought back a lot of old memories and I began to daydream about the night I had first met her. We had met just prior to the death of a mutual friend and she had invited me to her apartment because she needed someone to talk to. During that first evening we discovered we had many things in common and we began dating. We went to Mexico with Roger, we went to dinner with friends or alone, usually to Mrs. Brady's out on old Highway 94, and we took long drives in the country or down to the Pacific beaches.

One evening while we were at Kelly's Steak House on Motel Row she had reached across the table and clutched my hand.

"Let's get married," she had said suddenly.

"I don't think I'm ready for that, Brandy," I had answered, trembling with fright at the thought.

We discussed it earnestly that entire evening and, although I couldn't think of a good reason not to get married, I had balked. I wanted to travel and get away from anthill living. I was sick to death of the stink of the cities and I ached to get away where I could think, take photographs and write my book. I desperately needed to get my life in order and a wife just wasn't in the plans right then.' She had told me she was willing to go with me but I felt there was no room in my life for her because I was living in a camper on the back of my truck and stopped where I happened to be when the sun went down. Everything I was allotted after my divorce, which was precious little, was packed into that camper, and it was neither home nor life-style for a lady who had never been out of San Diego County.

On Thursday evening, the fifth of July, 1984, I battened down all the loose gear and headed for San Diego for the last time, drove to Roger's house to tell him good-bye, and left at 7:30 p.m.

I headed east toward the desert on Interstate Eight and stopped at Boulder Oaks rest stop for the night. I hadn't even bothered to call Brandy to tell her good-bye. I had known her for six short weeks; now I had called her after being gone for more than six months to ask her for a favor that might get her into some trouble. When I thought about it, it seemed a low class thing to do.

I sat at the bar dividing the living room from the kitchen and I had a good view of the road in front of the house. At two p.m. a black maxi-van pulled into the parking lot at Lee's Bar and stopped, but no one got out. The van had dark tinted windows and I could visualize a couple of agents inside with cameras and recorders watching and listening to everything that went on around my

house.

I shook myself out of that kind of thinking. I didn't want to get paranoid about this thing. They might actually be people visiting the saloon and I was disgusted with myself for seeing dark figures with daggers around every corner. I hadn't done anything wrong so, if they were Dansforth's legmen, let them look.

Most people are creatures of habit and I was as predictable as the next guy. If someone had followed me up the west coast to the Pacific Northwest and along the Columbia to the Lochsa, and the Clearwater, and up to Selway Falls, Idaho, they would have known I should be certifiably insane. If they had followed me from the Wind River Indian lands across the entire breadth of the continent and down to the Florida Keys they would have gone home and given me up for a lunatic. Maybe I was, then, but here in Melrose, Florida, one day was much the same as the next and I had settled into an easy routine that was unchanging and undisturbed until Dansforth and his henchmen had shown up.

Now I saw cars following me. Now I stayed awake at night wondering about the safety of my friend. Now I kept an eye on the window, alert for a stakeout. For these reasons alone, I didn't like Dansforth. He had invaded my privacy and upset my tranquillity. I hoped it was for a good reason.

I stayed in the house for a couple of days working on my book and looking out the window to see if the van was still there. I had enough food to last a month and enough research for the book to keep me busy for a year. I decided to wait and see what happened.

It rained for a couple of hours on Thursday afternoon but by three p.m. it had cleared and the sun was shining. I had been in the kitchen preparing an early dinner and, while it simmered, I went back to my notes.

The van was gone.

At five p.m. that evening while I was washing the dishes, the phone rang. It was Dansforth.

"I'm off tomorrow," he said. "How would you like to show me your favorite fishing hole?"

"Sure:' I replied, "I need to get away from the typewriter anyhow. What time?"

"Fairly early. Say eight o'clock." It wasn't a question; it was a statement.

"Eight. I'll be ready." He hung up without saying good-bye.

Busy man, that Dansforth, direct and to the point. I wondered what he had on his mind this time.

On Friday, the eighteenth of January, I was standing beside the truck in the front yard. I had loaded the boat and had stowed all my gear in beside it. It was a cool, crisp morning with broken clouds and a hint of rain. I looked at my watch; it was one minute until eight. A car slowed and turned in off the road and bumped its way to the house. Agent Dansforth was right on time and I wondered if he had parked the carpool Chrysler around the bend someplace and waited for the proper time to arrive. I wouldn't put it past him.

He fished his gear out of the trunk and stowed it in with mine, eyeing the boat with some misgivings.

"Is this the boat?" he asked.

"All ten aluminum feet of her," I answered. "Why, can't you swim?" He gave me a look that would have melted a ton of stainless steel and climbed into the truck. I suspect he was hoping for a forty-footer with flying bridge and outriggers.

I climbed in and primed the Chevy, then drove slowly to the Santa Fe Lake Park boat ramp. Dansforth made small talk on the way, remarking how nice it was to have a day off and how he envied me for having a Navy pension and not having to work.

I reminded him that I had given up many of my personal freedoms and goals for twenty years to earn that pension and it wasn't something the Navy Department handed out like early chow passes.

I could tell he wasn't impressed.

Twenty minutes later we were drifting around the edges of the lake. I had tossed my lines over the side and settled in against the aft thwart with my heels hooked over the gunnels, and Dansforth was sitting uncomfortably on the bow thwart trying to work a backlash out of his three hundred dollar reel, eyeing my three dollar cane pole distastefully.

"It may not be fancy," I said from under my hat, "but it doesn't backlash, either." The little red bobber bumped happily against the side of the boat.

"I didn't see you bait the hook," Dansforth said.

"Didn't. Don't feel like cleaning fish today."

"Then why go to all the trouble of coming out here?"

"Ah, Dansforth," I chided as I sat up and pushed my hat back, "you're not a angler; you're a hunter. To be a real angler you first have to be an escapist. I don't come out here to fish; I come out here to think. If I want good fish I'll go to Food 4 Less in Gainesville. I come out here to get away from people like you."

He looked at me long and hard, his brow furrowed in thought, then went back to his knotty problem. I got the distinct impression not many people ever talked back to him.

"We're on your turf now, eh?" He waved a hand toward the lake.

"Such as it is."

I was back under the hat with my arms folded across my chest. I could hear his reel clicking as he wound in a few feet of monofilament, then quiet as he filched out another knot, then clicking as he wound in some more. About ten minutes later the rod cut the air and I heard the reel sing as it spun off twenty yards of line. The lure plonked down in shallow water near the shore. Dansforth retrieved it in a jerky sequence. If the bass were out cruising he would probably get one. After awhile he cleared his throat as if he had something important to say.

"You're pretty much at ease out here, aren't you?" he asked.

"It beats living in San Diego all to hell."

"Perhaps. I wouldn't want it as a

steady diet."

"Where are you from, Dansforth?"

"What?"

"Where are you from? Originally. What town?"

"You've never heard of it. A little town in New Jersey."

"Try me."

"Oyster Creek."

"At the mouth of the Mullica River on the south shore of Great Bay. Yeah, I've been there."

I peered out from under the hat. Dansforth was staring at me in astonishment.

"You've heard of it?"

"Been there. Fourteen-foot boat up the Intercoastal Waterway."

I proceeded to tell him how I had left Fort Washington Park and headed down the Potomac River, around Point Lookout into Chesapeake Bay, north to the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal, through the canal and into Delaware Bay. I told him how I had made Cape May on a dead reckoning course from Stoney Point and rounded the Cape instead of going through the canal, and the rest of the trip up the waterway to Great Bay and the mouth of the Mullica River.

"Took four days:' I added. "Back in 1957 when I was with Defense Intelligence Agency."

"Remarkable," Dansforth said, shaking his head. "You remember all the names and places and events of a trip you took in a fourteen-foot boat nearly thirty years ago. That is remarkable."

"Hard to forget an adventure like that."

"Still," he said, "after almost thirty years. Your trip from California across the United States I can understand because it only happened recently, but to remember something that happened so long ago, and so precisely, is pretty unusual. I know you're telling me the truth because that's where I grew up. You could only know about those places by having been there."

He reeled in and sailed the lure over to another spot. He watched it float lazily among the reeds for awhile, gave it a couple of short jerks, and began easing it in again. I pulled the boat cushion off the bottom and stuffed it behind my back. I wanted to ask him what we were doing here but I decided to wait until he brought it up. I didn't have to wait long.

"I don't suppose you've heard anything from your friend?" he asked.

"No. Why, has something happened that I should know about?"

"No, no. I was just wondering."

"Maybe you could tell me something," I said. I sat up and got comfortable on the aft thwart. "If Roger does show up on my doorstep some fine evening, what am I supposed to do?"

"Notify me immediately, of course."

Of course.

"Okay, another question. What makes you think he's going to come here?"

Dansforth reeled in and laid his rod in the bottom of the boat where he could break it if he stepped on it.

"Because you're the only person he called. I feel certain he'll either arrive or contact you somehow."

I lit a Marlboro and thought about that for awhile. "Do you happen to know if there's a sailboat in his garage?"

"Yes." Dansforth smiled and his eyes wrinkled shut. "You were thinking that he might have sailed someplace else, Mexico perhaps, and departed from there."

"Gave it some thought." I gestured toward the rod. "Try over there at the base of that dead tree. Put it right in the tall grass."

He flicked the lure to the spot I'd indicated and in less than a minute he was fighting a six-pounder toward the boat. Huffing and puffing, he raised the fish and I snagged it with the net, holding it up for him to admire.

"Nice fish," I said, then cleaned it and packed it in his ice chest while he tried for another. A meat hunter, that Dansforth.

"Very stimulating," he said, watching his lure carefully.

"Perhaps. It's a lot more fun if you don't have to clean them."

He laughed at that and relaxed a bit.

"You don't like me, do you?" he asked after awhile.

"Let's just say I don't like what you do for a living," I said honestly.

"But it has to be done."

"I suppose so." I took a final drag off the Marlboro and mashed it out in my rusty tin can ashtray. "I guess somebody has to do it."

"But you find it distasteful."

That was putting it mildly.

"Let's say I deplore the world situation that makes it necessary. I understand as long as people engage in espionage we must have other people who conduct counterespionage, but that doesn't mean I have to like it."

"But as you said, I'm a hunter."

"Hunting and trapping other human beings can't really be all that rewarding."

"On the contrary, it is the most rewarding simply because it is the most challenging. It is intelligence against intelligence, cunning against cunning, fox against hound."

"Angler against fish."

"Exactly, if you must put it that way. It is competition that hones the senses and stimulates the mind."

"That bass didn't know it was competing. It saw something that looked like breakfast and grabbed it."

"Ah, yes," Dansforth replied, "but the fish was competing with all the other fish to see which one got the bait first. Its mistake was that it didn't examine the lure closely enough before it struck. Its greed, its competitive instinct, and its lack of experience got it killed."

"But the fish didn't know it was competing."

"And isn't that the beauty of it?" Dansforth reeled in and sailed the lure to the right side of the dead tree. I watched him for half an hour, during which time neither of us spoke. Precisely and methodically, he cast his lure just where he wanted it and by the end

of the thirty minutes he had four nice bass which I cleaned and put away.

I wondered what attractive lures he was going to toss my way in the next few hours. Precisely and methodically he had told me a little, but not too much, dangling a dangerous lure in front of my face. About ten a.m. he reeled in and leaned the rod against the side of the boat, then got comfortable on his boat cushion.

"So, you had to clean fish after all. Perhaps you should have baited your own hook." He shifted around awkwardly, rocking the boat. "You were correct when you said this was a good place to think. I'll have to do it more often."

I waited to see what pearls of wisdom he had conjured up. We sat and studied each other from opposite ends of the boat.

"You made a call from a pay phone at the gas station two days ago. Why didn't you use your own phone?" he asked suddenly.

"Because if you tapped Roger's phone you've tapped mine."

"And you have something to hide?"

"No, I don't. I just don't like people listening to my conversations without my knowledge or approval."

"Then may I assure you that I have not tapped your phone?"

"You may say it, but you have not assured me at all."

"I could have had your phone tapped, or wired your house while you were busy with your breakfast at the restaurant, but I didn't. If you like, I'll have a team go in and check it out."

"Not necessary," I told him.

If someone was listening to my conversations or watching the house, I preferred to keep them busy doing that, rather than sneaking around somewhere, doing things I didn't know about. As long as I knew I was under surveillance, I could act accordingly. I didn't have to ask how he knew I had made the call and I was surprised he let me know I was being watched.

"What are you expecting to happen?" I asked.

"I told you before. I have reason to believe Roger Bentley will contact you soon."

"Where did you get this information! Why me?"

"We have hundreds of people working on this project and we are in constant communication. The process of elimination has narrowed the list down to very few persons. One of them is you."

I gazed out across the lake and chewed my lip. What did that mean? Did they actually know where Roger was? Were they following his progress toward me? If they knew where he was, why didn't they take him into custody? Maybe they thought I was an accomplice and were waiting to nab us together. If that was true, Dansforth certainly would not have warned me.

"So you're saying these people who are working on the case are suggesting that Roger is on his way here?"

Dansforth said nothing, just sat watching me with his owl-like gaze. I

was not at all comfortable with the thought that there were hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people sequestered in offices all over the country, hovering over telephones and computers or driving around in cars, all looking in my direction. It made me nervous. Especially when I didn't know what was going on. To Dansforth, I was like the bass: inquisitive and eager, but inexperienced. It was a fatal combination.

"So tell me," he said, still smiling, "whom did you call from the pay phone?"

"A friend in San Diego. I asked her to get me some information for the book." Half a truth. "She hasn't returned my call."

"I suppose it's mere coincidence that you need information from San Diego at this particular time?"

His questions were rarely phrased as questions; they were rather more like quizzical statements. He always approached everything sideways rather than head-on. That was an occupational symptom common to most people in his profession and, translated, it means: "I've already guessed why you did this or that, so don't lie to me."

He rubbed his hands together vigorously and looked at the sky. It had gotten colder and the solid overcast was lead-grey and threatening rain.

"I've finished fishing, let's go in," he said flatly.

He didn't consider for a moment that I might not be ready to go in. He was ready and I was supposed to comply without protest. He was finished fishing. I'll bet.

I lifted my cane pole and stuck the hook into the soft, scarred butt, fired up the Evinrude and plowed slowly back to the landing. As we approached the ramp I noticed an old pickup truck with a boat trailer parked off to one side. Two guys were making motions like they were getting ready to launch. I looked at the sky again,

Not a chance.

They were the same two who had been watching me the day I made the call to Brandy. I shot a quick glance at Dansforth who was eyeing them casually.

They both looked up briefly and waved, then went back to their business. We unloaded our gear onto the catwalk and I slid the boat up onto the ramp, flipped it over, and carried it to the truck while Dansforth gathered up about half of our gear. As I was sliding the boat into the back of my truck one guy, wrapped in a mackinaw and wearing a billed cap that advertised Caterpillar Tractors, came over and asked if we'd caught anything. I told him Dansforth had caught four bass, but it had got too cold so we came in. Dansforth arrived with his load and I helped stow it in the truck. He was wound up tighter than a drunk sailor's watch, and that made me nervous.

His movements were stiff and rapid and he was trying to watch all three of us at the same time. The other guy, who had been standing by his boat with his hands in his pockets, came over and listened to our conversation. They fol-

lowed us back to the ramp and the guy with his hands in his pockets wanted to see the fish, so Dansforth flipped open the cooler and let them admire his kill.

The guy in the mackinaw, in one swift movement, stuffed a piece of paper into my pocket and bent over to pick up the rest of our gear. When he straightened up he flashed me one of those don't say a word looks and headed for my truck.

I looked at Dansforth to see if he had caught the move, but he was too intent on convincing the other guy what a great hunter he was. I took my load to the truck and waited for Dansforth. Mackinaw was back at his own boat tying and untying all the lines.

Dansforth was as silent and stiff as a corpse all the way back home. I tried to act nonchalant but couldn't help wondering what had gotten into him. The appearance of the two men had him wrapped pretty tight. Perhaps this was their prearranged signal that something was coming down. If so, why had the man slipped the note into my pocket? I glanced over at Dansforth. He was staring out the windshield as if he were in a trance, almost glassy-eyed. When we got to the house he jumped out of the truck and threw everything, except the cooler, into the trunk of the Chrysler.

"You keep the fish," he demanded.

"Let me get something to put them in."

"Never mind. Keep the cooler, too." He got into the car and started the engine.

"You want to come in for coffee?"

"No!" he almost yelled. "I have things to do now." He put the car in gear and sped away.

I watched him go, shaking my head and wondering what had happened to fire him up that way. I reached into my pocket and pulled out the slip of paper. It was a hastily scrawled note, written on a piece of white envelope with a felt-tip pen. It said simply:

LIBRARY 3 O'CLOCK.

I stuffed the note back into my pocket and carried the cooler inside. I knew instantly that someone had been in the house while I was gone. The bar that divides the living room from the kitchen is where I sit to read and copy information fur my book. It looks cluttered and messy, disorganized and haphazard, but I always have things arranged in neat little piles. When I type my manuscripts I arrange each finished page face down in a certain way. Chapter One lays slightly to the right, Chapter Two lays slightly to the left, and so forth, so if I have to go back to review something I know just where to pick up the pile. The piles had been moved and so had some of my notes.

I went through the rest of the house to see if anything else had been disturbed. I went to the bedroom closet last to check the carbine but it hadn't been moved. The doors had been opened but there were no fingerprints on the rifle. This invasion of privacy had aroused some primal instincts but I was determined not to let it upset me.

I made a fresh pot of coffee and sat down in front of my computer while it

perked to read my manuscript. It was all there. What had they expected to find? I tried to imagine what was going on in their little minds. Obviously someone was convinced I was involved in this plot to steal a classified project and that was beginning to annoy me. Did they think evidence of my involvement was somewhere in my notes?

I felt angry and insulted that someone who thought they were above the law would come into my house and filch through my belongings. If I were not involved at the beginning, or even if I had not wanted to become involved as late as yesterday, I was involved now. Today it was a matter of principle.

I wanted a box of hand grenades. I wanted a satchel of C-4 plastic explosive. I wanted an M-60 light machine gun. I wanted a fast jet fighter festooned with rockets and napalm and a million rounds of ammunition. I wanted to jump in the truck and speed after Dansforth and the other two men, run them down on the highway, then get out and pound them into unrecognizable garbage with the butt-end of my carbine.

I walked out onto the porch and stared at the darkening sky while I tried to get a grip on things. My napalm philosophy, my angry overkill attitude, just wouldn't solve anything where they were concerned. I could wish them dead a hundred times, but every morning when I got up they would still be outside the window with their vans and cameras and recorders. The only way to get rid of them would be to play the game out to the end, whatever that end might be.

I was suddenly aware of the ache in my kidneys from the adrenaline surging through my body. I waited until I was breathing normally then looked again at the sky. It was dark and ominous, and blew a cold, wet wind at me.

Damn them all to unholy hell.

FOUR

I shook the appalling nightmare death-wish from my mind and went back into the house. It was almost one p.m. The coffee was perking on the stove and the house seemed unusually cold.

It was as dreary inside as it was outside. I pulled the note from my pocket, read it again, then turned it over and looked at the back as if an explanation might be there. The back was blank; the cryptic note remained unexplained. Which library did he mean? I had been to every one in the area I could find. I decided I was supposed to go to the one in Melrose. What did the guy want and who was he? Was he another good guy or was he one of the foreign agents who wanted to get his hands on the generator?

I wished I had kept my service .45. It hadn't been accurate but it didn't have to be; if you hit a man in the hand he went down, and that gave you all day to do whatever else you might be disposed to do to him. The Ithaca was a close range defensive weapon I could have hidden under my peacoat; the carbine was designed to kill dozens of people at a time but there was no way I could sneak it into the library.

I mooched around the house looking out all the windows until fifteen minutes to three. I don't know what I expected to see out there; hordes of armed men draped in black, I suppose. I put on my jacket and went to the phone to call Brandy. It was almost noon in California and I really didn't expect her to be home, but let the phone ring for a full minute before I hung up and headed for the library. As I drove up the road I looked in every direction to see if anyone was following me or was waiting somewhere at the side of the road. As far as I could determine, everything was normal.

I looked for the old pickup or the sedan when I pulled into the library parking lot but neither of them was there so I parked and went inside. The guy in the mackinaw was seated at a library table facing the door and he held up a hand to motion me over. The librarian was the only other person there, and she suddenly got busy on the other side of the room when I walked in. I watched cautiously as the man quickly scanned a copy of Richard Bach's ILLUSIONS.

"This is an interesting book," he said, "have you read it?"

"I've read all his books; they're in my library at home:' I replied, then added: "What do you want?"

"Have a seat, Mister Constable," he said with a slight grimace. He flipped out his ID wallet and motioned me to a chair. I read it, still standing, and handed it back.

"Have a seat," he repeated.

I slid out a chair and sat on the edge like a runner on his mark. He studied me for awhile and I thought about his ID. His name was David Husky and he worked for the same organization as Dansforth. Dark hair, hazel eyes, six feet-one, a hundred and forty-five pounds, and his birth date revealed that he was thirty-three years old. Unless he was exceptional at his job, the agency would stick him behind a desk in two or three years and let him vegetate.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "You made a phone call to Brandy Thomson in San Diego recently asking for information about Roger Bentley. I want to assure you that you will find no information about him from anyone. Miss Thomson will not be returning your call."

"Has she been arrested?" The muscles in my jaw tightened involuntarily.

"No, no, no," he answered quickly, "however, she has been persuaded not to answer your calls or to get involved any further in this matter."

"Tell me, if you will, just what this matter is."

"We have reason to believe you will receive a package from Roger Bentley in the very near future," he said, ignoring my question. "When you do, you are to safeguard it until someone asks you for it."

"I take it you know where Roger is?"

"He is in our custody."

"Is he alright?" I asked. I relaxed a bit and turned toward him.

"Quite safe, I assure you."

"How do I know that?" Nobody had

assured me of anything yet.

"Take my word for it. He's been in our custody for a week."

"What about the classified documents he supposedly had in his possession?"

"They were mailed." His dark eyes drilled into me, watching for something.

I sat back in my chair and puzzled over the information. He said he had Roger in his custody for a week, and the package had been mailed before they found him. The mail was slow but it didn't seem likely it was that slow. Surely I should have received the package by now, unless it hadn't been mailed at all, or had been mailed after Roger was taken into custody. What was I supposed to do with it? Who would come to take it off my hands? Why was it being sent to me?

"I'm more than a little disturbed by this whole affair, Mister Husky," I said. "Before you people showed up I was a perfectly happy retired sailor, my life was low-key, and the only thing I had to worry about was mailing ransom checks every month to an ex-wife. You people have screwed that up and I'm not happy about it. What happens if I just toss this goddamn thing, this Cascade Generator, in a bayou someplace and forget it?"

"Mister Constable," he said condescendingly, "I assure you that . . . ."

"Wait a minute!," I yelled. "You people have been trying to assure me of this and that for a week now. You haven't assured me of anything. You're just saying words that have no meaning."

He sighed with exasperation. "Mister Constable, I ass... ." He stopped and looked at the tip of my finger in his face, then cleared his throat and began again.

"This is a very complicated situation. The outcome of this project could very well affect world conditions for generations. It is important that you cooperate with us for the next few days, then we'll go and leave you in peace."

"Why did you disturb my peace in the first place?" I could just read the headlines now: REST IN PEACE.

"You are the only one who fit into the picture naturally. The only one. Had you not been available, we would have had to create a contact and we didn't have time to do that."

I sat there watching him chew on his words, lying to me, and I despised him. He was telling me the agency couldn't figure a way in a six-month period to do what I was supposed to do in a week. I knew they could do anything they wanted, at any time, to anyone. If they wanted to assassinate a world leader, they could do it instantly, and do it with impunity. If they wanted to remove an obstacle against putting a satellite into orbit, or something as simple as making certain a person didn't get to work on time on any particular day, well, they could do that, too. In the back of my mind I wanted to tell him where he could put the project but I just sat there thinking about it, and he let me.

"How will I get the package?" I asked after awhile. He must have been holding his breath because he exhaled long and slowly.

"You will get a notice in the mail to claim a package at the post office. To get it, you must sign the name MORNINGSTAR. If you don't, you won't get the package. Do you understand?"

"Morningstar." I spelled it and he nodded.

"Don't open the package. If it has been opened the courier will not accept it. Do you understand? Don't open the package."

I nodded and he continued.

"Hide the package in a place where it can't be found if your house is searched. If your house is searched, do not alert the authorities, but if your house is searched and the package is taken, contact me immediately." He handed me a card with his phone number on it.

"Immediately, Mister Constable."

"Who will the courier be?"

"We don't know yet."

"Then how am I supposed to know who to give it to?"

"It will be whoever comes for the package." Husky actually looked apologetic.

"What happens if more than one person comes for the package?"

"Only one will come for it. Give it to him and do not ask questions. That will be the end of your responsibility."

"Do you want me to notify you that the courier has taken the package?"

"We will know. Do nothing. Your responsibility will be finished when it is out of your hands. You will no longer be involved."

"I will be involved," I corrected him, "until I know for certain that Brandy Thomson and Roger Bentley are safe and well."

"Miss Thomson has requested that we allow her to come here after this sortie is completed. As a reward for her cooperation we will fly her here at government expense. Roger Bentley will get his vacation and return to work as if nothing ever happened." He got up to leave but I stopped him.

"One other thing, if you don't mind. Are those your people in the black van?"

"Yes, but they are not watching you, they are protecting you."

"And when can I expect these intruders into my life to be gone?"

"As soon as the courier leaves with the package."

"In other words, they're going to observe the pick up."

"Correct." He left the building and walked toward County road Twenty-One.

Protecting me, were they? It was nice to know that someone cared, but if they hadn't included me in their fiasco they wouldn't have to waste the taxpayers' money watching out for me.

I drove home, took a hot shower, and fell onto the bed. It was only four-thirty but I was mentally exhausted. I hadn't been able to write a single page of manuscript for a couple of days, and only a few research notes. I wanted to get a chapter or two roughed out before Brandy arrived, because I didn't, wouldn't, want to work at all after that,

at least not until after she returned to San Diego. I wondered who had arranged for her vacation, and I wondered why Roger was going to go back to work as if nothing had ever happened, but before I could think about it I was drifting into that crazy, half-conscious realm of twilight sleep.

Sometime in the middle of the night I pulled the covers over me and slept in total unconscious bliss until almost noon the next day.

When I woke, I did it gradually, easily. I became aware of sounds, and of sunlight and shadows on the walls. I yawned and stretched and rolled, languishing in the warmth of heavy comforters. I felt renewed, reborn, regenerated, revitalized.

I had slept soundly for the first time in almost a week and it had done wonders for me. Today, or tomorrow, this donnybrook with Dansforth and Husky would be finished and I could get on with my life. I had imposed upon myself the task of completing my manuscript by the end of March and I was behind schedule.

I finally crawled out of the bed, got cleaned up and dressed, then made some breakfast. I reviewed some of my notes and read parts of my manuscript while I ate, then at half past one I walked down to the mailbox.

There was nothing for me, no answer to my query concerning the manuscript; no claim card from the post office. Since that was on hold for another day, I decided to return some books to the Gainesville Library and spend an hour or two browsing for others. I wrote myself a note to look for Bernard DeVoto's book about the Lewis and Clark Expedition of 1803, put on a jacket and drove into town.

Gainesville's Santa Fe Regional Library is on University Avenue just one block from the Federal Building where Dansforth, Husky, and their Neanderthal pals mark time. It is an imposing building with thousands of books and dozens of people eager to help lost clients, most of whom were college students from the University of Florida which is a few blocks away.

I searched the files for fifteen minutes then spent half an hour looking for the books I wanted, but I found none of them on the shelves, so I began searching for alternates. By four p.m. I had an armload of books on the states through which I had travelled, and DeVoto's book, Across The Wide Missouri. I checked them out and carried them to the truck, started the engine and began to back out when I saw Husky trotting across the parking lot waving a hand at me.

Just what I needed to ruin what had been an almost perfect day.

I pulled back into the space, shut off the engine, and waited until he trotted up to the window.

"Now what?" I asked disgustedly.

"I just wanted to tell you that Brandy Thomson has elected to leave San Diego earlier than we had planned and she is on her way here now." He wasn't even out of breath. I arched an eyebrow. "She wanted to bring her car, and since it will

take four or five days for her to arrive, she shouldn't be in the way during the completion of our project. We had considered stopping her but we decided to allow her to continue and simply follow her."

"Why follow her?" I looked at Husky, puzzled.

"To make sure she arrives safely."

"You're telling me that someone has been assigned to follow her all the way across the United States to make sure she arrives safely?" That didn't make any sense and I told him so. "Why would she not arrive safely, aside from the possibility that she might have car trouble or get involved in an accident? Surely that's not within the realm of your concern. It's more than that; it's something else."

"Think, Mister Constable." He pursed his lips and cocked his head at me. "Many powerful people want what you will soon have in your possession. Do you think for a moment that they would overlook the possibility that they can get it from you as ransom for her life?" He grimaced and clenched his teeth as if he expected me to swing at him.

I could only shake my head in disbelief.

"Stop her then," I demanded. "Take her into custody or something."

"We don't feel that's necessary at this point in time, but if we see that she's in danger we'll protect her." He shifted uncomfortably.

"Damn all of you to hell, Husky," I growled. "If anything happens to her you're going to have to deal with one crazy Cherokee. It's bad enough that you people got me involved in this thing, but involving her is unforgivable."

He assessed the look of rage on my face and stepped back just out of reach.

"I'm going home to think about this for awhile," I said. "I'm going to try to remain calm. Tomorrow is the Superbowl Game. Don't bother me. Don't call me, don't come to my house, and keep that black van far enough away that I can't see it."

I started the engine and backed out, forcing him to jump out of the way.

For reasons I've never been able to understand, my mind works better when I'm on the road. I can think clearly and define goals, purposes, and plans of attack. I can sort out plots and subplots, and arrange events into logical sequences and understandable continuity. I'm sure that's why l spent six months out there by myself, and why the road always nags at me to come back.

Ignoring the slash and burn landscape, I headed north, lost in my own angry thoughts.

Husky had known I was at the library and trotted over to tell me that last piece of disgusting news. If he hadn't known I was there he would have tried to call me at home until he reached me. How was he keeping such close track of me? I hadn't spotted anyone following me and I knew he hadn't just accidently looked out his window and seen my truck parked at the library. His meetings with me weren't accidental, ever; they were

cleverly planned every time. He knew every move I made and I couldn't figure out how he was doing it but it illustrated what I knew all along. The agency could do anything it wanted to do and, short of murdering them all, I was nearly helpless in preventing them from doing so.

I hated that.

I drove until I had disposed of my anger, then I began to sort out the events of the last four days.

Steve Dansforth had told me that Roger was suspected of having stolen classified materials from Future Industries and he was still missing. Then Husky told me they had Roger in custody for a week, but had not directly mentioned the theft of the documents.

One or both of them was either lying or badly misinformed, or both of them were purposely misleading me for some unexplained reason. When Dansforth first questioned me only four days earlier he seemed to be under the impression Roger was making his way to Florida and would soon arrive.

Two days later he still maintained that Roger would contact me somehow and bring the classified materials, and that I was to contact him immediately. Husky told me flatly that the package had been mailed but he really didn't say when or by whom. Both of them worked for the same organization and if either of them wanted to retrieve the classified package all they had to do was to go to the post office, show their badges, and pick it up. Instead, I was supposed to pick up the package and keep it safely hidden until a courier came to take it off my hands, an act which someone would observe.

Dansforth had said that if there was a foreign agent in the project he would be a highly qualified person with perfect credentials and would know within hours that Roger had been captured. Husky said Roger had been in custody for a week so he knew, but Dansforth, who seemed to know more about the project, didn't know Roger was in custody yet, thought he was still making his way to Florida. Dansforth was very interested in the package; Husky seemed more interested in finding out who would come to claim it.

Husky didn't want the package; he could pick it up any time he wanted to from the post office. He seemed to be more interested in finding out who else knew about it, and never once questioned why I was involved.

Dansforth was visibly upset when the two men had showed up at the boat ramp, had rushed off to do something, and I had not heard from him since that time. What was it about their sudden appearance that had disturbed him? If Roger had been in custody for some time, as David Husky had said he was, why didn't Dansforth know about it? They both worked for D.I.C.E. If one knew, why not the other?

Dansforth said they could not determine how Roger had left San Diego or if he had left at ail.

Furthermore, he perceived Roger as a traitor who had stolen his country's most jealously guarded secret while

Husky had stated unequivocally that Roger would return to work and resume his duties as if nothing had happened after the materials were recovered. That would not likely be the fate of a traitor.

If what Agent Husky had told me was true, I had to believe that Roger had never left San Diego and, in fact, had not stolen the classified project. This was a setup to gain control of the project. Someone was feeding bad information to Dansforth leading him closer and closer to the package, because he believed the package contained exactly what he had been told: one Cascade Generator and the tapes and documents describing how to build more, and Dansforth wanted that package to the point that he was willing to risk his life or take another's to get it.

Dansforth had not said it outright, but he had indicated he thought I knew more about the theft of the materials than I had admitted. He had been led to me by Roger's phone call and my letters to Roger. He didn't know about Brandy, he didn't know Roger was in custody, and he didn't know the package had been mailed. But Dansforth, like Husky, could have the package for the asking; neither of them needed me as a go-between.

Unless, of course, one of them was a spy. Husky told me only one person would come for the package. Dansforth didn't have a partner and he seemed a perfect candidate as a spy. Husky was only thirty-three years old, but Dansforth was closer to my age, perhaps forty-five, and would soon be put out to pasture. He had long passed the age of thirty-six when most agents of mediocre talent were relegated to boring desk jobs in a dusty office. Faced with that prospect, Dansforth might be looking for a way to provide himself with enormous wealth after his retirement, and his single minded goal to get the Cascade Generator seemed to indicate that was probably the case.

He was being fed information by someone who wanted him to know where the package was, what was in it, and to whom it would be delivered, and he was being told that information by someone who was determined to expose him as a traitor.

Husky was going to be there to capture him.

I switched on my dome light and looked at my watch. It was 6:30 p.m. I had been driving for an hour and a half so I pulled into the next Interstate service station and gassed up the truck.

After I filled the tank, I pulled around to the cafe parking lot and went in for coffee. As far as I could tell no one had followed me from Gainesville. I had either eluded them or they had decided not to follow me. Nevertheless, I stayed in the restaurant until a few minutes to ten, drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes, watching everyone who came and went, and hashing over everything that I had thought about all evening.

It was almost midnight when I got home, and by the time I had showered and shaved and poured myself into bed, I figured I knew who the double agent was.

FIVE

Sunday morning dawned misty orange, a wispy fog clung to the meadows and low places, and the pasture behind the house looked as if someone had hung a giant Oriental painting from the sky. I lit two lanterns over the mantle to help take the chill from the room, then sat at the kitchen table drinking coffee and watching the sun rise over the pines half a mile away. It was not a particularly spectacular sunrise except that I was still alive to see it; that alone makes any sunrise special to me. The sky glowed melon orange and then faded to a lackluster grey-blue as the fog burned away.

I watched it with only part of my mind because I was thinking of Brandy out there somewhere on the road being followed across the United States by some government agent. I kept wondering why they had let her travel, especially when they had reason to believe someone might try to abduct her and hold her captive for the Cascade Generator. I tried to assuage my fears by convincing myself that news of the theft of the generator had not reached those outside the small circle of government agencies. The only logical reason I could think of to explain why they had let her leave San Diego was to draw out some of the bounty hunters so they could deal with them. In other words, they might be using her for bait, just as they were using me, and if that was true Brandy could be in a lot of danger. I punished myself mentally for calling her and getting her involved in all this, and I cursed Dansforth and Husky and all the rest of their colleagues for getting me involved. If anything happened to her, I would have to live with it.

If I survived.

I waved my hand in front of my face trying to erase the ominous thoughts and wandered over to my printer, stood for a moment reading the page I had left in the bail, turned on the computer, sat on the bar stool, and began typing. I stayed there most of the day working on the manuscript, trying not to think about the past few days. I knew I could solve nothing by worrying and, besides that, everything might work out just as Husky had planned and no one would get hurt in the process. Maybe that was just whistling in the dark but it helped me get through the day, and by evening I had input eighty-five pages of the manuscript. I fixed a light dinner and settled back to watch the Forty-niners win Superbowl XIX. No one had called, no one had come to the door, and the black van was nowhere to be seen. By ten p.m. I was in bed.

* * * * *

The two patrol boats cruised slowly in the evening light and eased in to the north shore of the Mekong, their throaty exhausts grumbling in the muddy waters near the bank. The fifty cal gunner jumped off our boat and made the bowline fast to some debris at the water's edge, then the Chief Boatswain's Mate shut down the diesel and we followed the gunner ashore, grumbling and stretching. Several of the men wandered off into the trees to urinate while others stood around waiting for the lieutenant on the lead boat to come over and tell us what

to do next. The eight boat crew members separated from the thirteen members of our unit and made motions like they were holding field day on their boats. The lieutenant made his way over, followed by the six enlisted men, and assembled us into a tight knot on the ground, then spread out an area map and jabbed a finger at it.

"We're here," he said casually, "about ten miles from the Cambodian border. From here we go on foot. Check your gear and stay close. We'll move up to this village for the night." He stabbed a finger toward three men and indicated with hand signals that they were to take point, left, and right flank. He pointed a finger at me and the guy next to me. "You two take the first watch."

He went around the group telling each man which watch he had, then got up and motioned us toward the village. There was a lot of rattling and clattering as each man checked his gear on the way up to the village, and when we got there he nodded to a pile of trash and debris, indicating that was where I was supposed to take my position. I pulled out of the column and watched them move on. Thirty yards farther the second man peeled off to the left and disappeared into some thin undergrowth and, after I noted where he was, I squatted down next to the trash heap and listened to the sounds of the evening jungle. There was a hushed quiet in the gentle breeze that stirred the trees and in the evening sounds of birds waiting for night. I leaned back and glanced up at the darkening sky and saw a straight white scar of contrail to the north. Twin streams of heated exhaust quickly converged into a single trail of cooling moisture with a tiny, dark dot leading it across the sky toward home base. It was, I knew, a Douglas Skywarrior returning from a photo mission along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and was probably headed back to Ton Son Nhut or Bien Hoa.

A column of smoke rose out of the jungle to the north as a Surface-to-Air missile streaked skyward in pursuit of the homeward-bound plane. Inside, the third crewman would have his face pressed hard against the rubber face ring of the radar screen looking for any blips that would warn him of approaching missiles or aircraft.

When the aircraft was running flight lines for photo-reconnaissance, the third crewman was attending to intervalometers and cameras, and watching the monitoring board that would tell him the status of any of the thirteen cameras on board. But outbound and homeward bound his eyes would be on the radar screen, for the Skywarrior was a defenseless camera platform and could only escape a pursuing missile with desperate evasive maneuvers.

Now the missile stabbed the sky in a long, ragged arc behind and below the plane. Even through the telephoto lens of my Nikon it was difficult to see the plane clearly as it dived and banked to starboard. I thought at first the SAM missed because it continued on past the plane a short distance, but then it disintegrated in a shower of smoking shards. I found the plane again at a lower altitude and centered it in the viewfinder. It was rolling in a lazy starboard turn, nose down toward the earth. The contrail was gone

but now smoke trailed from the crippled plane as the spin got tighter and the angle of descent got steeper until it was in a vertical spinning dive. It disappeared behind the distant trees of the darkening jungle and I searched the sky for parachutes, using the Nikon as a monocular, but found none.

The death scene had taken only about thirty seconds. I looked up the trail toward the other man on watch and saw that he was talking to a village girl under some palmettos. They hadn't even noticed the drama above them. I sat back against the trash heap and listened again to the sounds of the sleeping jungle. It was almost peaceful.

* * * * *

Almost.

I didn't sleep well after the dream and by six a.m. I was up and fixing breakfast, shivering in the early morning chill. I ate breakfast behind my computer, attacking the manuscript savagely. I took a break at noon and walked down to the mailbox but there was nothing for me so I went back to the computer and stayed there writing until eight o'clock that night.

Tuesday and Wednesday were about the same, and I was beginning to think Dansforth and Husky had played out their little drama without me, which would have suited me just fine. But on Thursday morning at ten the phone rang and I rushed to answer it, thinking it might be Brandy asking for directions to my home.

It was Dansforth.

"Can you come downtown?" he asked quickly, foregoing any preliminary pleasantries.

I told him I was going to return some books to the library and I would be in the balcony. He agreed to meet me there and hung up. He had been abrupt and brutally businesslike, and I wondered what was happening in the higher echelons to light the fire under him.

I returned the books I had checked out earlier in the week and looked up toward the balcony. Dansforth was standing there with his palms on the black metal railing watching everyone below him. When he was certain I had seen him he turned and disappeared between the shelves of books, and I made my way up the stairs to where he was looking over some titles. Presently he spoke quietly. "I've been out of town since I saw you last. I just returned this morning and I'm tired, so listen carefully and answer some questions." I nodded and he continued.

"Do you remember the two men who were at the boat dock last week?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Had you ever seen them before that day?"

"Yes." I didn't tell him they had been following me.

"Do you know who they are?"

"Should I?" I asked, evading the question. He took that for a yes.

"Have they contacted you at any time?"

I studied his face for a moment and decided to tell him what had been happening. He listened carefully to it all,

even the last four days of relative inactivity, appraising it and analyzing it as I told it. When I finished he was smiling wryly.

"So," he said, as if he had come to some mental agreement with himself. "You know, Richard, when I left you in such a hurry last week I considered letting you out of this, but since that time certain things have happened that prevent me from doing so." He took a random book from a shelf and pulled up a low stool, indicating another for me. I waited for him to continue while he thumbed through the pages of the book.

"How tough are you, Richard?"

"I know how to take the heat."

"Umm, hmm, I'm sure you do." He watched me carefully as if he were trying to gauge just how tough I really was.

"You know, coping with situations in time of war is one thing, because brave, dedicated men hardly consider the alternatives; they do what must be done without questions. But coping with situations in peaceful times, at home, in your own country, where the enemy is not so clearly defined, and where you don't really expect dreadful things to happen, is quite another." He paused, letting that soak in, then continued.

"I went to San Diego after I left you last week and I discovered some very disturbing things." He held up a finger. "Number one, I discovered why Roger Bentley never showed up here in Florida. He never left San Diego. He was recruited over a year ago to help root out one or more spies at Future Industries when he began to suspect that additional information about the Cascade Generator was being leaked to the outside.

"He's been under surveillance since that time, and in custody since the day he left the plant. Everything else, the phone call to you, the airline reservation, was supposed to make it look as though he was coming here with top secret documents. He didn't know at the time, because all this has been arranged without his knowledge, that you were supposed to help the agency set up delivery of the generator so we could expose the spies inside the plant. Unfortunately, you were considered expendable if it came down to that."

"I've already thought about that," I said, "but what happens if I don't play the game? What happens if l don't go to the post office to pick up the package?"

"Someone is going to make certain you do, and that is what I meant when I said that certain things have happened that prevent us from letting you out of this."

"Let me guess," I said. "Someone is holding Brandy Thomson hostage as ransom for the generator."

"You say that rather casually," he said as he shot a quick glance at me. "I had thought you would be outraged."

"Why? Because someone kidnapped a girl I hardly know? I don't want her to get hurt but, frankly, she doesn't mean anything to me. If she did I wouldn't have left her in San Diego, would I?"

"But I thought. . . ."

"Bad intelligence, Dansforth. You're

getting your information from an unreliable source. If she gets hurt, well, she will be another innocent victim of your little game but I won't lose any sleep over it. Somebody made a mistake. It isn't the first time."

He narrowed his eyes trying to determine if I was lying and I tossed him a question to throw him off guard.

"What makes you think, under the circumstances, that the real generator, if it exists at all, is going to be in the box at the post office?"

He closed the book and looked at the cover, then looked back at me.

"I think I've misjudged you, Mister Constable, You really are quite a devious and unpredictable person."

"No, no," I replied. "Not at all. If I don't claim the package you guys don't have a ball game. I've already figured out that you can go to the post office any time you want it, so it isn't the package you're after. You people are after a spy. Any spy. It doesn't matter that the person you nab isn't really the spy, at least not right now. If the real spy thinks you're convinced you have the real spy, he might get careless and reveal himself. That makes it easier for you to grab him, or her, or them. See, Dansforth, you people have tunnel vision; you see spies and bad guys behind every post and your whole focus on reality has gone to hell. If you can't uncover a real crisis or find real spies, you invent them, and you don't care how many innocent people get hurt while you're playing your silly games. Anybody, everybody, is dispensable as far as you're concerned, but I don't happen to believe that.

"If the Cascade Generator is real, which I don't believe, it isn't out there where any one of a thousand people can get their hands on it. That would be sheer stupidity. I'm not going to get myself killed for a boxful of comic books, or whatever that box contains just so you can have something to boast about."

"Those holding Miss Thomson might not be disposed to see it your way," Dansforth said quietly. "They can be very ruthless in ways you cannot even imagine."

"I've seen ruthless."

Dansforth placed the book back on the shelf and stood up, rubbing his eyes. He sighed heavily and looked down at me.

"Pick up the package, Richard," he said wearily and walked away. I stood and watched as he went down the stairs, across the lobby, and out the front door.

I wished I had kept my service .45.

So, they had her. On the way home I tried to figure out how to end the nightmare and get Brandy returned safely. Despite my casual remarks about her, I felt certain Dansforth knew she was my number one concern. I had wanted to ask him where she was but I knew that would reveal my true concern for her so I had let it pass. I doubt he would have told me anyhow. Knowing where she was wouldn't solve anything. What did I think I was going to do, storm the place with the carbine blazing? That would just get us all killed, and I really didn't know which side had her.

Unfortunately, it was now a situation where all of them were bad guys as far as I was concerned. Dansforth still wanted me to pick up the package and was determined I should do it even it meant sacrificing Brandy. That bothered me, but I was convinced they wouldn't think of harming her until after I had delivered the package. If I could convince them to trade her for the package I might have a chance to save her life, but in order to do that I would have to get her captors on my territory, under my terms and they might not be willing to do that.

I kept watching the rearview mirror to see if I was being followed but I couldn't spot any suspicious cars. I turned off of Route 26 at the Lake Elizabeth Road and drove down to the lakeside development looking for a place to set up the delivery. It was after two p.m. and the sky was leaden grey and threatening rain. I drove around the north side of the project across the unpaved portion of the road to the east side of the lake, and soon found a clearing with thick brush and a heavy stand of spruce surrounding it.

I pulled off the road and parked the truck so it would be difficult to spot by anyone driving around the project, then walked down to the lake where I could see the concrete foundation for a house. I scouted the area, looking for stands of brush I could use for cover from which I could observe the concrete slab and all the trails leading to it. The soil was soft and sandy; I could easily dig a hole large enough to bury the package until I was ready to exchange it for Brandy.

The lake was narrow at that point and I could swim it, even fully clothed, if I had to. There were some rushes and a wrecked fishing dock on the other side I could use for cover if I made it that far. By the time I had finished making my plans it had begun to sprinkle. I didn't want to get stuck in the potholes at the north end of the lake so I walked back to the truck and drove home.

Husky and two other men were waiting on the porch when I drove up through a steady downpour. I shut off the engine and sat looking at them until the rain on the windshield obscured them, then jumped out and splashed up to the porch. Husky greeted me and introduced the others as Blankenship and Van Valkenburg but I had to take his word for that since neither of them produced identification. I guess they all thought his word was good enough; I didn't even care just then.

"Can we talk inside?" Husky asked, jerking a thumb toward the door.

"Why not?" I sure didn't feel like standing in the rain all afternoon so I ushered them inside, took the barstool before my typewriter, and motioned them to sit wherever they wanted. When everyone was seated I asked Husky what he wanted.

"Here's the claim slip for the package," he said, reaching into his coat pocket. "Do you remember the instructions?"

"Yeah."

"I'd like for you to pick up the package as soon as possible."

I looked out at the rain. "If it stops

raining before the post office closes I'll pick it up this afternoon; if not, I'll get it tomorrow."

Husky stiffened and the other two glanced back and forth to see if anyone was supposed to challenge that, but nobody did. I wanted to ask Husky what he knew about Brandy but I decided to wait and see if he brought it up. If he didn't mention it before he left, I would quiz him and see what kind of reaction I got for my efforts. At normal speed with normal road conditions she should have arrived, and I imagined Husky would think it odd if I didn't inquire. After all, they were the ones who were supposed to be monitoring her progress.

"How much time will pass before someone takes it off my hands?"

"Probably a day; no more than two."

"And I just sit on it until this someone arrives, is that it?"

"That's correct."

Thinking back over the events of the past few days I had realized Husky had never mentioned what was in the package; I had told him. I was the first one to mention the classified documents and the only one to mention the Cascade Generator. Now I wondered if he knew how I had that information. Surely he knew Dansforth had talked to me at the house and at the restaurant. That brought up another question: Why were these two agents, who worked for the same agency, working separately? I wanted to take the lid off and ask some pointed questions, but I was intimidated by the presence of the other agents. Were they witnesses or were they muscle? I asked Husky.

"Are these two agents going to observe the transfer?"

"Yes! They'll keep you under constant surveillance until the courier arrives. After the transfer has been made they'll be watching the courier."

I looked at the two agents closely. They looked like agents, dressed like agents, were neat, well-groomed, and both appeared to be in their early thirties. If I had seen them on the streets I would have guessed they were agents. They were nearly carbon copies of Husky and their dress code gave them away.

"Tell me, Husky," I said suddenly, "what's in the package?"

The question caught him off guard and he took a few seconds to frame an answer. The other two didn't bat an eye.

"I believe you already know what's in the package."

"No," I said, wagging a finger, "all I know is what I have been told and I don't believe that for a second."

Now he knew I had been told of the arrival of the package by someone else.

"In the first place," I continued, "I see no logical reason why I should be entrusted with such classified information, if it exists at all, and in the second place, who in their right mind would send it through the mail? As safe as that might be, too many people could get their hands on it. If the package does contain classified information, and if it is in the postal system somewhere, and if you really do want it, all you have to do is go get it. You don't need me for

that. You have already indicated to me that you know where the package is but you are waiting for me to go get it; you even hand me the claim slip out of your own pocket.

"That tells me you don't want the package; you want the courier who receives it, or the person to whom he takes it, or you want everyone to think the courier is a spy, whether he is or not, or you're setting me up to take the rap. But what if there's a slip up? What if the spy, whomever it may be, manages to escape with the package? Are you going to let that happen?

"No. You've filled that package with old newspapers or some things that appears to be authentic but are, in fact, phony as hell. In which case, despite appearances to the contrary, you want the agent to escape, right? That does two things: one, it exposes the agent and renders him useless for any future operations and, two, it keeps the foreign government busy trying to figure out why the formulas don't work. Years of research and millions of kopecs go down the drain, and your side pulls off a great coup. Now everyone can relax and research on the generator can continue unhampered, if it really exists, which I'm inclined to doubt."

I got up and went to the stove to make coffee. Husky leaned on the arm of the chair watching me calmly. The other two were stone-faced and I couldn't help thinking they were already convinced I was the man they would clap in irons and haul off to the caliboose.

"That's very astute, Mister Constable, quite a brilliant deduction," Husky said calmly. "How long did it take you to figure that out?"

It was a leading question and my answer would determine his next move. I decided it was time to quit playing cat and mouse.

"By the end of the first day I'd already figured out the story about the generator was too absurd to be real. I don't fit into the picture at all unless I'm here for no other reason than to help you catch your spy. The spy is being fed information which leads him here. He's been told a secret project has disappeared, and he'll soon be informed that it's in the mail and on its way to me. Like you, he could go get it any time he wanted because he has the credentials and horsepower to do so, but he doesn't need to risk exposing himself by claiming the package at the post office because all he has to do is wait for me to hand it to him. These two will be watching from the bushes and, bingo, you have your spy."

Husky was smiling and seemed quite pleased. He leaned forward and fixed me with his piercing eyes. "I suppose you know who the spy is then?" Another one of those sideways questions.

"Sure. Dansforth," I answered confidently. Husky nodded his approval.

"I must caution you, since you have figured that out, that you must not let him know that you suspect or your life will be in danger. Dansforth—his real name is Stephan Patsayev—is a ruthless pro-

fessional and he will not hesitate for a moment to kill you if he thinks you are a threat to him. Do you understand?"

"Yeah," I said, "but what makes you think he won't kill me anyway once the delivery has been made?"

"He'd hardly risk that as long as he believes you are an innocent dupe. He wouldn't want to leave a trail of bodies behind him; it would complicate his departure from the country."

"Wonderful," I said sarcastically. "Does anyone want a cup of coffee?"

They all wanted it fixed differently and I clanked around with cups and spoons for a couple of minutes while we chatted. Husky, in particular, seemed to be in good spirits now that the charade was over and we were all playing by the same set of rules. I delivered the coffee and climbed back onto my bar stool.

"I must confess, Mister Constable, that I misjudged you somewhat. Perhaps I should have confided in you more completely but I wasn't certain you could fully grasp the weight of the situation. No offense. I see now that I was wrong in that judgement and I apologize. You have remarkable perception."

"No need to apologize; you had no reason to confide in me since you know little about me other than what you may have read in my service record. What worried me at the beginning of all this is that you might have thought I was the spy, or an accomplice, or that I might have been set up to look like a spy so you could get your hands on the generator.

"We entertained the idea."

"Well, then, I hope that's cleared up."

"It is."

"Since we're confiding in each other now," I said, "perhaps you could tell me where Brandy Thomson is. I thought she should have been here by now."

"I'm told the snow in Texas has hampered her progress somewhat. We're watching her closely and she's safe. She'll be here in a day or two, I'm sure." He said it so convincingly I almost believed him.

"Well, since I got her involved by calling her, I feel obligated to make certain she is safe. I'm not going to hand over the package until I see her with my own two eyes."

Everything stopped. Blankenship held his cup of coffee poised an inch from his lips, Van Valkenburg was frozen reaching for his cup, and Husky was in limbo somewhere between rubbing his eyes and stifling a yawn. They all looked at me in disbelief, then looked at each other. Suddenly Husky smiled broadly, and everyone finished what they were doing.

"We'll put her on a plane tonight, have her here in the morning, and deliver her car by rail. That's a promise," he said.

"I knew you could do it," I replied and tossed down the last of my coffee. As if that was a signal, they all stood and made motions to leave, and I went to the door with them.

"If it stops raining I'll claim the package before the post office closes," I told Husky.

"Oh, we'll know when you get it," Husky replied with a wry grin. They all walked quickly to the car and drove away.

I stood on the porch and watched them disappear over the hill, then walked out to the truck and began feeling under the bumpers and fenders until I found a signal emitter stuck to the left rear wheel well. That's how Husky had known where I was every minute of the day, and that's why he'd told me they'd know when I picked up the package, but his smug reply is what made me finally realize how they'd done it. I walked through the rain and wedged the box into a knothole in one of the pecan trees.

Let them keep tabs on that for a couple of days.

SIX

I walked through the pouring rain to the storage shed behind the house, got my trenching tool and a large trash bag, tossed them into the truck and headed for the post office. I was in luck; the rain had kept customers away and I picked up the package without having to wait, but was surprised that the package was only the size of a boot box and weighed less than twenty pounds. I placed it on the front seat and headed for Lake Elizabeth, hoping the agents who were supposed to be monitoring me were still tracking the pecan tree in my front yard.

By the time I got to the lake it had stopped raining but cold drops were falling from the trees. I plowed through the potholes and down into the brush, wrapped the package in the plastic bag, knelt down to dig a hole in which to bury it, was finished and on my way back to the truck in five minutes.

On the way home I thought about the package. I had wanted to open it, even though Husky had admonished me several times that I should not. I'm sure he had his reasons and I was certain I knew what they were. He wanted to be sure, when he finally got the generator back, that it was the same one that had been mailed when Roger had been taken into custody. Of all the people who were involved in the operation, I was convinced that Husky was the only person who really knew what the package contained and, now that he was so close to getting it, he didn't want it tampered with.

I parked the truck under the tree, went into the house, and got out of my wet coat, then walked into the bedroom to get the carbine. Too many people had had the opportunity to browse around while I'd been gone for the past few days, and I didn't trust any of them to keep their hands off my belongings. Someone had been in the closet again, and I decided to check the carbine.

I removed the clip and completely disassembled the piece, checking each part carefully with a jeweller's loupe. When I was satisfied it had not been tampered with, I cleaned each part thoroughly and reassembled it, then slipped the first cartridge out of the clip. Using the loupe, I examined the casing and the slug, and found what I was looking for.

The slug had been removed and replaced. I clamped the cartridge gently

in my small craft vise and twisted the slug out. I had expected to find the cartridge empty, the powder removed, but I didn't expect to find it filled with a thick, grey paste. Plastic explosive, probably C-4. If I had fired the round it would have blown the carbine apart, killing me. I removed the remaining rounds and put them in a box without examining them. Perhaps there were no more explosive rounds, perhaps they had all been tampered with; it was academic because I was going to dispose of them and buy several new boxes first thing Saturday morning. From that moment on, the carbine would stay with me until this fiasco was finished. I dusted the piece, wrapped it in a soft cloth, and placed it on the bench at the foot of my bed.

It had been near sundown by the time I had finished and I still had important things to do before I slept. I grabbed a flashlight and went out to the storage building behind the house. On the way, I glanced out the front window to see if the black van had reappeared but couldn't see it. If Blankenship and Van Valkenburg were out there they were well hidden.

I filched around in the storage building for tools, wire, rope, nails, and other hardware I would need at the lake. I grabbed a ground cover, a hatchet, some lumber, and half a dozen concrete blocks and put everything in the bed of the truck, then slid the boat in on top of the pile. After I tied the boat down I went back inside, dug out most of my hunting and camping gear and stacked it in a neat pile on the living room floor, then broke out my thermals and camouflaged greens. I stuffed as much food as I thought I would need for a couple of days into my backpack, as well as matches, flashlight, survival knife, and mess kit. I filled my canteen with water and clipped it and four thirty-round clips to the Web belt.

By the time I had piled everything I thought I would need on the floor and stood back to survey it, it was almost eight p.m. I was satisfied I could stay out for a week if I had to, but I hoped all this business would be over within a matter of hours.

It's funny, but I didn't think about dying.

* * * * *

We had spent months walking the Ho Chi Minh Trail between the Mekong Delta and Lam Dong Province in Military Region Two, and we had found that most of the area was already infiltrated by large cadres of Viet Cong and some divisions of North Vietnamese Regulars. Our intelligence sorties had already convinced us that less than thirty percent of the supplies from North Vietnam were coming down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Most seemed to be coming overland from Cambodia but we were in no position at that time to trace those movements back to their source.

The most likely possibility was that most of the supplies were being shipped to a port in Cambodia, probably Sihounakville, either from China or from North Vietnam. Because of the large buildup of enemy troops along the border, we were unable to continue north safely and the lieutenant had decided to

cut across the country to Dalat, and from there to the U.S. Military base at Cam Ranh Bay, a distance of about 150 miles.

The entire area was under Communist influence so we had to avoid the villages and travel mostly at night. We had already lost three men in brief, running skirmishes, and of the ten of us who remained, four were ill with exhaustion and festering sores. Using a buddy system, the lieutenant had divided us into five groups of two men each; a healthy man with an ill man, the sergeant and himself. Each pair was given brief copies of the intelligence information so it could be reported if any of us survived.

We averaged about ten miles a night and at the end of the second week of our return trip we were near the border separating Tuyen Duc Province from Ninh Thuan Province. Most of the roads were mined so we had crossed open farmlands or lightly forested areas in as straight a line as possible from south of Dalat towards Cam Ranh. It had been slow and exhausting but we had made it that far without encountering any large hostile forces.

One morning the lieutenant had stopped the group at the edge of a wide rice paddy about an hour before sunrise and set us in a loose defensive circle. Five men would sleep while the other five stood watches in two hour shifts, with the healthy men taking the first watches.

The sun came up smoky yellow-orange above the jungle and faded to a pale blue-grey, sending broken shards of light across the shallow water of the rice paddy, and the jungle slowly came alive. I had stayed on watch an extra thirty minutes because I wanted my buddy to sleep. He was covered with fungus sores around his waist and crotch, and his feet were raw.

All of us had lost weight because we had diarrhea or other intestinal problems, but he was so weak from a combination of problems that I often had to carry him even over level ground. I had hoped the extra sleep might restore some of his strength so he could walk more often. I was watching him closely because he was breathing so lightly that several times I thought he had died. Suddenly his face exploded and dust jumped from his body. At the same time I heard a pop and the sounds of automatic gunfire to my right, then there were more pops and the trees splintered and crashed around me.

I instinctively rolled away and mashed myself down beside a fallen, rotting log trying to determine where the fire was coming from. I could hear curses and return fire just fifty feet away but the undergrowth was so thick I couldn't tell which direction anyone was firing. I snapped the safety off and pushed my piece out ahead of me, then started crawling towards the sound of the gunfire as slugs thumped and ricocheted all around me.

About thirty feet away I came across two GI's and I checked them quickly; they were both dead. Just ahead of me the next group was returning some heavy fire so I grabbed the dead soldiers' rifles and dragged them with me until I tumbled into a small depression on top of the lieutenant.

He had a hole in his face the size of my fist. Three other GI's were blasting away at everything within range whether it moved or not.

"We're it, cousin. The rest are dead as far we can tell," one of them yelled above the noise.

"You okay?"

I nodded.

"How 'bout your buddy?"

I drew a finger across my throat, then lifted the muzzle of my rifle over the edge of the hole and sprayed a dozen rounds in the general direction of the hostile fire.

"Where the hell are they?" I shouted.

"Everywhere, man," one of them answered.

"How many?"

"Who the hell knows?"

I looked at them between bursts of gunfire; all had been wounded. The guy farthest from me had almost all his left hand missing and he was resting his piece in the crook of his arm to fire while blood formed an ever-increasing puddle a foot from his face. I rolled over to him and yanked him down into the hole, then tied a piece of torn shirt around his hand. He was weak and trembling, and he was staring at the mutilated hand with glassy eyes. After I had finished he looked up at me.

"Goddamn slopes have killed me," he said, then lifted his piece and began firing again.

"Thought you wuz okay, cousin," the first guy said to me and poked a finger at my back. I jumped and clenched my teeth with pain. He looked at the wound between my spine and right shoulder blade, and decided it was a fragment of a slug that had ricocheted.

"I can't even feel it," I said.

"Not yet, you can't," he replied. "Think you can travel?"

"Let's go!"

"Not us; you. Me an' the brutha are dead and this one can't walk."

I looked at the guy in the middle. He was barefoot and his feet were cracked and swollen red from fungus infection.

'You get out, cousin, before the slopes have a chance to get around behind us."

He turned and began firing into the brush, shouting for the others to help him lay down covering fire. I knew better than to argue with him so I grabbed the bag of exposed film and documents, slung it over my shoulder, and picked up my piece. We looked at each other for a moment.

"Go," he said.

"Good luck."

"Go."

The hostile fire seemed lighter and I figured they had some casualties so maybe those three might make it although it wasn't likely. I jumped over the rim of the hole and rolled to some thick brush, then moved off quickly away from the sounds of the gunfire. I remember thinking that I didn't know any of their names, didn't know where they came from; didn't know any of their families. When I got back to the States, I wanted to be able to go to each of their families and tell them why they never went home, tell them where they were when they died so they wouldn't have to wonder and worry

for years that their sons were prisoners in some stinking forced labor camp in the middle of a jungle half way around the world. I thought about all the words I could say to them, good words, kind words about their brave, young men lost so far away. I thought of the women who would weep. I thought of the men who would turn away so I wouldn't see them weep. I thought of children who would grow up wondering where their fathers were.

Not once did I think of dying.

* * * * *

After I showered I sat on the couch in the darkness and thought about Brandy, hoping she was alright. Husky had told me they would put her on a plane and fly her to Gainesville by Saturday at the latest but I wasn't ready to believe that. Dansforth told me Brandy was being held as a hostage and if that was true it meant Husky had her if he could put her on a plane as easily as he had led me to believe. But it could be that Husky really believed she was still on the road somewhere in Texas, although I doubted it.

Dansforth still wanted the package and wasn't above trading Brandy to get it, but that didn't prove he had kidnapped her. His assertion that she had been taken hostage might be a bluff to force me into giving him the generator without an argument. I wondered what his reaction would be when I told him the delivery would be in the middle of the forest instead of on my front porch. I imagined that he would be hesitant, perhaps exasperated, but he was a pro and would adjust his plan to fit the circumstances. He would have to accept it because I was determined, short of endangering Brandy, to have Dansforth and Husky with me on a battlefield of my choosing.

I was determined, as well, not to hand over the package until I was certain Brandy was safe, although I knew it would be a tenuous safety if her captors brought her to the meeting site. Unless I was very lucky I would have little chance of protecting her, and myself, from harm.

There was nothing complicated or exotic about my plan. If the delivery was consummated without any problems I would walk away with Brandy and let them fight it out among themselves. But if the situation got nasty or if it looked like we were going to walk into a trap, I wanted some insurance and an escape route.

Suddenly I saw a flash of light from the trees on the other side of the road, so I fished the binoculars out of the pile on the floor and focused on the spot. Soon I saw the flash again as if someone with a flashlight turned toward me once in awhile. I thought of Blankenship and Van Valkenburg out there in the brush watching the house and decided to take a closer look. It was five minutes after midnight.

I know surveillance teams have night scopes in use after dark to detect radiated heat from warm-blooded creatures so, after I dressed, I went out the back door because I was shielded from observation by the buildings near the

road. I circled around, staying next to the property fence until I got to the road, which I crossed quickly, then I stepped into the brush and knelt, listening for any sounds.

Noise travels a long way in a quiet forest and I could hear the sounds of at least two persons moving equipment, stepping on dry branches, and talking in low voices. I knew they could hear me moving through the brush as easily as I could hear them if I moved too quickly or too awkwardly, and if they were alert. But I had all night to creep the two hundred feet to their position and I had crept through more hostile forests than this one.

Stepping carefully, I put each foot down, feeling for any twig or dry leaf that might make a noise. If I felt a twig, I would move my foot to another spot until I could feel soft earth, then I would make the move forward. I repeated the procedure over and over, ducking under low hanging branches and easing over fallen trees until, half an hour later, I was twenty feet from the black van. I could see the two men through the tinted windows drinking coffee and chatting casually, and I could see the night scope pointed out the back window toward my house. I watched for five minutes to make certain no one else was outside, then I stepped quietly to the front of the van, crouching down not more than six feet from the front bumper. I slipped my survival knife from its sheath and eased down, feeling for the lower radiator hose with my free hand. I cut the hose slowly and gently until I could feel warm coolant spraying out.

It took another five minutes to slide from under the vehicle and make my way around to the side, and another twenty minutes to get back to the road. They might see me leave in a few hours but they weren't going to follow me very far. By the time I got into bed their engine coolant would be on the ground. I decided to take the longest way to the gun shop when I went in to buy ammunition; that should strand them far enough away that they wouldn't be nosing around while I was setting up the meeting site at Lake Elizabeth. I knew they could radio for help or flag someone down but because it would be Saturday their motor pool would probably be lightly manned and slow on the uptake. I only needed three hours to do everything necessary to protect myself and after that they wouldn't have to find me; I would invite them to join me.

It was two a.m. by the time I got into bed but I stayed awake for another hour trying to piece my plan together in proper sequence, worrying about Brandy, and trying to sort out the pieces of the puzzle so they made some kind of sense.

Neither Dansforth nor Husky would go to so much trouble for a box of junk. If either of them thought for a moment the package contained newspapers or phony blueprints they would have pulled out long ago, but I didn't want them to know I realized that.

Both of them would eliminate any obstacle hampering the achievement of their respective goals. One wanted the

package; the other wanted a spy. Both of them wanted to neutralize the other. The package and whatever it contained was the bait but I knew neither of them was foolish enough to believe it could change hands without difficulties.

Dansforth had bolted when Husky had showed up at the boat ramp and had gone off to San Diego to gather some intelligence first hand, so he knew he had been given false information somewhere along the line. Had he recognized Husky or was he afraid Husky had recognized him? Husky said Dansforth was really Stephan Patsayev, but Dansforth hadn't discussed Husky at all except to ask if he had contacted me. It was obvious they knew each other whether they worked out of the same station or not.

Husky had told me Roger Bentley was in custody and Dansforth later confirmed that, adding that Roger was a part of the scheme to route out the spies. But they had given me conflicting stories about Brandy and that didn't make any sense unless one of them was either lying or actually believed he was telling me the truth.

Someone wanted this operation to go as planned or Brandy wouldn't be involved, and that confirmed what I had suspected all along: there was more to the project than met the eye.

Just how much more I hadn't determined yet.

I was awake and dressed by seven a.m. so I carried the gear out to the truck. The two agents across the road were surely wondering what the hell I was up to. I had on my cammies with the carbine slung over my shoulder, the web belt with the survival knife, four clip pouches, and the canteen around my waist, and I had on my black jump boots with my trousers carefully bloused and tucked in at the tops. I wanted them to know I was prepared to make a stand if necessary, although I knew I didn't have a chance of outgunning them if a firefight developed. They had an entire government arsenal at their disposal, everything from handguns to neutron bombs.

I timed my departure so the gun shop would be open by the time I got there because I didn't want to sit around in the parking lot waiting for someone to let me in. At the same time, I didn't want the two agents to have time to alert others to intercept me before I lost them, so when I saw through the binoculars that the black van had been moved near the road, I got into the truck and headed south on County Road 21. I watched the rearview mirror and drove slowly until I was certain they were behind me, then accelerated to seventy. Their engine gave up after three miles and they coasted off the road. I continued on to County Road 20, turned right and drove over to 301, turned north and drove up to Orange Heights, and pulled into the parking lot at Shooter's Supply.

I got some strange looks when I went in but five minutes later I had three boxes of ammunition, 150 rounds, and was on my way back to Lake Elizabeth, three miles away. It would not take them long to find me because I had left enough clues laying around to direct

them to the lake. If they followed my instructions they were supposed to meet me there at eight o'clock Sunday morning, although I knew at least one of them would probably show up sooner.

All I needed was three hours to get ready. I switched on the radio and got part of a news program about the mission of the Space Shuttle and the top secret payload it was carrying, but the signal faded so I shut it off. That was another one of those gimmicks, I thought, when classified information is "accidentally" or "inadvertently" leaked to the media so the government can come back huffing and puffing about irresponsible journalism and breach of national security.

All that is designed to make everyone sit up and listen to something they normally wouldn't. Someone wanted the world to know the United States was putting up a new, sophisticated communications satellite. If they hadn't wanted anyone to know that, they wouldn't have known, and to make certain everyone knew about it, practically everyone in the government, including the President, got on TV and raged for a week about this thing we weren't supposed to know about.

TV news commentators defended themselves, naturally, as did the newspapers and magazines in which the stories were printed. The world was forced to understand the significance of the technology of the satellite, even if they didn't want to. There was a news blackout and nothing makes Americans more curious or more furious than a government-imposed restriction on the amount and content of news they can read or hear.

The launch countdown did not commence until nine minutes before launch.

There were no interior views of the space vehicle. There was very little information given to the public about the running status of the mission. Special attention was drawn to the mission simply because the flagrant departure from the norm was designed to draw attention to it.

But why? All the Super Powers had put communications satellites up before this one. We all listen to each other's intelligence transmissions from ships, planes, shore stations, and space craft so what was the purpose of all the indignant rhetoric about this one?

Suddenly I stiffened and gripped the wheel, slowing the truck.

I pulled off the road and sat staring out the windshield with dumbstruck awe.

"Why you clever, devious bastards," I said aloud. What beautiful timing, what an absolutely clever, devious, logically beautiful dirty trick. Keep everyone guessing about the incredible technology of the communications systems aboard the satellite so they won't realize what the real secret is. It wasn't the communications part of the vehicle they were trying to protect; it was the engine, the power source.

It was the Cascade Generator.

SEVEN

I dug in. I made myself invisible. I built a blind and constructed a mantrap.

From my hole in the ground, covered with brush, I could see every approach to the concrete foundation, but the only way anyone could see me is if they broke through the roof and fell into the hole.

My hole. It was five feet long, two and a half feet wide, and two and a half feet deep, and the bottom was lined with six layers of ground cover to keep out the dampness and cold. Everything I had brought with me was neatly stacked at one end of the hole on shelves I had cut into the sides. I was ready to stay for a week.

I had hidden the boat a hundred feet away near the lake in a position where I could see it from the hole in case I had to go across the lake to escape, although I had no illusions I would make it to the other side if someone was shooting at me. That only happens in the movies. I left the truck in the bushes half a mile farther down the road so no one would suspect I was already in position. I leaned against the backpack and made myself comfortable. If everyone showed up on time, I had twenty hours to wait, although I expected somebody's army long before then.

I knew what I was waiting for. I knew who would be the first to arrive. I knew who would be bringing Brandy. I knew what the courier was after. I knew what was in the package. I knew why I was involved. I knew someone would die in the early Sunday morning chill.

I looked up through the brush over my head, through the branches of the spruce, through the electric blue sky, into space. What secret dramas were being played at the edge of the heavens at that moment? Had the crew released the satellite? It was a game, I thought, a dire, dreadful game being played against a background of stars; a game in which all the people of the earth were unwitting participants.

Overhead at that moment was a Cascade Generator powered satellite that could float in the silent, black void of space until the sun went Nova and melted it to dust. It could have been launched from the ground without using the Space Shuttle, but that would have raised an outcry of questions for which no one had prepared an answer. That would come later.

That would be a future revelation, a future technology carefully disguised as something else. Today the Cascade Generator would graduate from a test bench item to a piece of practical hardware. Tomorrow it would drive humankind at the speed of light to the edge of the galaxy and beyond. Maybe that was good.

Maybe it was our destiny to reach for the stars, spread the human seed into the cosmos, and insure the survival of the species.

The Cascade Generator could function as easily under water as it could in the void of space, and that made it the perfect engine for a vehicle on a distant sea where today's oil field worker would be tomorrow's miner colonist. If I could clearly see that faraway tomorrow, would I have acted differently? I wanted to believe that someone, somewhere,

with more understanding than I, would use the generator for some constructive goal, that it would never be used to subjugate the peoples of the earth. Within hours, two men with conflicting ideologies would come to claim the prize but, for better or worse, only one would walk away.

It was too late to put an end to the project for it already floated in the heavens above, and the formulas, the technology, the tapes, and the hardware were secure and could be duplicated at will. I couldn't change that by destroying the contents of the package buried in the sand fifty feet away, and only historians would record if humankind was the beneficiary or the victim of what our science had wrought. All I could do now would be to try to insure the generator did not fall into the hands of a hostile foreign government. They would get it sooner or later, but not tomorrow. That's why I was in the hole.

As the afternoon wore on my thoughts turned from humankind's future to my specific past. I began to remember little bits and pieces of my life when I was a kid growing up in southern Indiana. I thought of school days and how much trouble I'd had understanding mathematics, even the most simple, basic math, and how, when it had all suddenly registered, I'd considered it something of a miracle. I remembered the first commercial I'd ever read on my home town radio station. I remembered weeks long boat trips I'd made on the White River. I remember sleeping in House Rock Cave near Shoals, Indiana and camping on the banks of the river at Hindostan Falls. I remembered trips to Shakamak State Park, and to Spring Mill, Turkey Run, and Clifty Falls.

I remembered the colors of autumn in Indiana, and squirrels, jays, cardinals, and the sounds of meadowlarks in the pastures. I remembered gathering nuts and berries, mushrooms and fruits, and plowing the dark, fertile soil to plant our truck garden. I remembered my first car, a 1936 Plymouth sedan, and remembered that I'd had a great childhood, had done more as a kid than most people do in a lifetime.

I remembered learning to fly Piper Cubs and Aeronca Champs during the years when a radio in an airplane was unheard of, and I remembered the first time I got to fly front seat in a Stearman biplane. I could still hear that big, throaty, rumbling engine and feel the wind blast from that big propeller, remembered how I'd had to lean against the console to keep from freezing.

Thus I reviewed my life in disjointed pieces and all out of sequence that warm January afternoon as I waited in the damp hole, and in between the memories I recited poetry I had read and memorized. Frost, Brautigan, Riley, Cooleridge; Wilfred Owen. Owen's Dulce et Decorum Est kept running around in my head and I repeated the lines over and over:

"If in some smothering dream you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,

His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood come
gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud of vile,
incurable sores on innocent tongues;
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old LIE, sweet and fitting it is to die
For one's country."

In the fading afternoon light I could still see the weighted pendulum hanging in the tree above the buried package, wired with a fragile pin, ready to swing down out of the branches with its dozen evil, deadly stakes to impale an enemy. I traced the almost invisible wire up through the brush, alongside the tree to the trigger, the lever, which could, with a gentle tug of the wire, release the pole with its concrete block weighted platform silently in a gentle are down upon some unsuspecting person.

That was insurance. It was like having an extra ally hiding in the tree. It was silent and quick and absolutely lethal. The brush had not been thick enough to conceal a spring-loaded mantrap on the ground so I had suspended it from the tree, hidden it in the heavy branches of the spruce. At the bottom of its arc it cleared the ground by less than two feet and anyone standing within fifteen feet of that point in a line with the arc would be killed. It only worked one time, but that was enough. It reached the bottom of its arc one second after the trigger was released and no one was agile enough to get out of the way once it began to fall. I hoped I didn't have to use it.

Darkness pushed itself down upon the forest. In the west the sky was clear and bright, but under the trees it seemed darker than it really was. In the hole it was like a tomb. I stretched my cramped legs and tried to work the aches from my back. It was five p.m. and already getting cold although it was still comfortable in the hole. Even though I was dressed warmly, I knew I was going to get cold later on in the night and I had brought a Sterno can to light if I got too uncomfortable.

I eased back against the pack, alert to the sounds of the forest, aware of the smells in the air, of the damp earth, of my own body, the odors of decaying leaves; aware, too, of the very tremblings of the earth. I could hear the distant rumbling of a jet crossing the sky. Was Brandy on it? I heard the near sounds of jays, echoes across the lake, the sounds of my heart beating, and my breathing. I closed my eyes.

* * * * *

They hated the darkness. It was heavy and evil and it forced itself down upon us, breathing an ominous death. No one wanted to move at night for the darkness belonged to the Viet Cong, the chien si, the sappers, the black painted wraiths who inhabited the ditches and elephant grass, the bamboo and rice paddies, and the roads and alleys and streets when the sun went down and the night was as black

as black as black.

They were like children, those GI's, and when they peered into the darkness their eyes were round and full of fear. Their hearts were full of dread and their minds were full of death and cold and lonely sufferings. They thought of their families, of their mothers' comforting breasts and loving words, of prayers, dreams, hopes, and girlfriends.

They wanted to be inside by sundown, huddled together with comrades, listening to their transistor radios and laughing the forced laughs of young men afraid to die. They knew they could die just as easily in the bunkers, the hooches, but they felt that would be preferable to dying in the lonely darkness of a silent, alien, haunted jungle.

A quick bullet in the brain, among comrades who would send their bodies home was better than being left to rot in the jungle pierced by pungi stakes. They wore talismans to ward off the evil and they used marijuana and acid to ward off the fear.

After sundown they would fire their weapons into the darkness in every direction to send the unseen enemy fleeing before their superior firepower, but the enemy was rarely there. The enemy was ghosts and goblins, and the boogie man under the bed. The enemy was women and children, and old men with hand grenades and knives, plastic explosives and AK-47s. The enemy was mantraps and strangle wires, arrows, spears, and hideous, vile, crude wooden stakes that pierced the heart and body and psyche.

They were not afraid to die, those chien si, those old men, those children, those wrinkled thousand year old grandmothers. If Dulce et Decorum Est was not apropos to American GIs, it was an ancient and common belief of the Vietnamese. It was their theme song, their glory, their ultimate task and goal. They buried their dead and envied the burned and maimed, the crippled and disfigured children, because they felt they would have beautiful stories to tell of how they joined the common fight to send the invading armies from their beloved land, and had the scars to prove it. The GIs would never understand a mentality that would sacrifice an entire village to kill one American soldier or down one plane or sink one patrol boat. So they stayed inside and huddled together as if that gave them immunity from the fleeting wraiths of the jungle night.

No one on our Long Range Recon Patrol knew the name of any other member. That was so we wouldn't be forced to reveal names if any of us were captured, and so we called each other man, heyman, buddy, or whatever other name came to mind when we had to talk. We were older. Lifers. No one was under thirty years old. Each of us had a specialty, but each could do the others' jobs if we had to. We were a close group because each of us depended on the others for survival, but none of us were really friends because none of us wanted to get too close to someone who was already dead. That's the way it was. We lived for the moment, the right now, and didn't think about tomorrow or next week or a time when the war would be over be-

cause we knew when we got there, even if we survived and got home without a scratch, this war would never, ever, be over. The wound was in the heart; the scar was in the mind.

Communist insurgents, operating from the mountainous areas in Military Region Two, would terrorize the villagers into submission by sweeping through the settlements and selecting a child or two at random to die on a miniature guillotine while all the other children were forced to watch the gruesome executions. The memory of those tiny, headless bodies writhing and jerking on the ground, and the pitiful screams of the parents will haunt my dreams and all my waking hours until the end of my life.

"The lieutenant's nuts," whispered the lanky corporal with a southern drawl. "Man, I hate to travel at night. We can move better during the day; why do we have to move at night? Why don't we tell him we want to move during the day?"

"Because he thinks the night is an advantage," someone explained. "We can't see them, they can't see us."

"But, Jeesus, man, they know the jungle. We don't. They got booby traps over every inch of that jungle. They got trails. They got places to hide. They got villages they can run to. What've we got? Nothing."

"Can it, man, we can't do anything about it; just shut up."

They moved apart and I heard the first man pleading his case to someone else.

No, there was no place to hide, no place to go, no safe harbor to run to when the going got nasty. There was only the trees, the bamboo, the elephant grass, and the muck and insects. There were flies, mosquitoes, rot, stink, ants, snakes, and the thick, heavy silence, but there was no place to hide. Don't fall apart, don't fall apart. Keep thinking you are going to make it back, make it to safety; make it back to Cam Ranh Bay.

A rifle clattered in the darkness and someone hissed a warning to keep the noise down. Stomachs growled. Men squirmed to get comfortable in the dampness and there was the smell of sweat, dirty socks, urine, gun oil, and mildewed clothing. We were ghosts drifting like smoke across the jungle floor until we faded away.

"I gotta take a crap," someone said and moved off into the darkness not too far away, crashing and thrashing through the foliage. He had diarrhea.

No one said anything because we all knew we might be out there the next minute doing the same thing. There was more crashing and rustling around when he came back and got as comfortable as possible, then it was quiet, dark, and terrible again.

* * * * *

The dream woke me. I raised my head and peered into the darkness, listening. For a moment I didn't know where I was but then I felt the brush around my face and felt the close, damp side of the hole, touched the rifle, felt the heavy clothing and remembered. I flicked on my penlight for a second and looked at my watch. It was one a.m.

I didn't mind the darkness; preferred it, in fact. It was an advantage if

one knew how to use it, knew where the trails were, knew the direction from which the enemy would come. It was an advantage when one knew the enemy would come down a certain path because that's the way it had been planned. It was an advantage if everything was staged to catch the enemy unaware, when one was hiding in a hole and there were horrible sharp things just waiting in the trees to fall and stab without warning.

I wanted to sleep again but the nightmare wouldn't let me. It hovered like a vulture on the ragged edge of my mind, pieces of it drifting in and out, replaying over and over. I leaned back and stared up through the spruce at the billion burning suns in the night sky, consciously recalling memories of the last few weeks I had spent in Vietnam, thinking of the millions of Americans who have no idea what really happened there.

Too many Americans are aware of their world only as fleeting images outside the windows of their Fords and Hondas. Trees are flashes of green between cities, and rivers are ugly, dangerous splashes of water under bridges they must cross on their way to work. The forest and deep, swift rivers are little more than five minutes of alien fantasy somewhere at the edge of their vision during a mad flight from home to office.

But there are no freeways in Vietnam and the jungle grows right up to the back door. Step outside your hooch and you are chin-deep in it. They don't drive Fords to work; they walk. They know every fallen tree, every puddle of stagnate water, every ancient, creaking limb. They can point to every bird nest on any trail they take from bamboo hut to rice paddy. They know when a flower dies or a leaf falls or a new shoot of bamboo pierces the pungent, damp earth. The jungle is as much a part of their lives as television is a part of ours.

If you were part of an army invading America, would you rather face a frightened city dweller or a poor dirt scratching coal miner from the hills of West Virginia who knew every inch of a twenty square mile area around his shack?

* * * * *

The lieutenant had had a plaque on his desk in Saigon:

At the end of the fight is a tombstone white

With the name of the late deceased,

And the epitaph drear: A fool lies here

Who tried to hustle the East.

It was a bastardized version of a poem by Kipling. I had read it once, and memorized it. I had repeated it a hundred times or more while I was trying to get back, alone, to Cam Ranh Bay. Sometimes the darkness had been ripped open by parachute flares that were incredibly bright and lit the jungle like a dozen drifting suns, leaving comet tails dangling beneath them, and I'd had to bury myself under leaves and brush for hours to keep from being captured.

How many days, how many weeks I had walked and crawled through that

jungle dragging the bag of film and documents I don't know. Days and nights melted into one unknowable period of time but, eventually, I had gotten there, walking up to the sentry at the gate trying to tell my story, too tired to gesture or elaborate, too weary too explain, too incoherent to be understood.

I had awakened in a hospital where no one spoke of the war. No one mentioned the terror and horror. No one spoke of the mutilation of children or the blistering sores of napalm victims or destroyed villages and ruined farms and defoliated jungles, of saturation bombing or V.C. or NVA, or hooches, or firefights, or Ho Chi Minh, or Haiphong, or Hanoi. No one spoke, either, of the days of dreaming of home, of girlfriends, jobs, cars, or Mom and Dad. Everybody had been in between. They couldn't go back and they didn't want to go on. Some had cried. Some had screamed at night, fighting the terror of agonizing nightmares that wouldn't go away. Some had gone quietly insane and had been taken away like crushed little images in wheelchairs to secret rooms and obscurity. We had never seen them again and we had never asked why because we all feared that the knowing would be more than we could bear, would be all it would take to tear away our masks, rip away reality and plunge us, too, into the anonymity of the incurably insane. We had pretended they never existed because we were all too close to being what they were.

Military people had come to ask questions after I had been there almost six weeks. I knew who they were but I couldn't talk to them, couldn't tell them what they wanted to know about the billions of dollars in American money we had found stored in caches along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. I'd been moved to an isolation ward after that and no one except a nurse came to see me for another two weeks, then there was a shrink with his own strange questions. They must have decided that I should be debriefed and interrogated by the big boys because they smuggled me out of the hospital one night and put me on a D.I.C.E. 727 headed Stateside.

I left Saigon one day before the TET Offensive in January of 1968.

The people who had interrogated me at Ton Son Nuht hadn't believed me, of course. They didn't want to hear that the Viet Cong were not receiving the bulk of their supplies from the north via the Ho Chi Minh Trail. It had been their pet theory, see, and I had sat there blowing it all to hell. Others had known the same thing: most of the supplies had come from Cambodia, tons of it, thousands of tons of it, seventy percent to eighty percent of it, but it hadn't mattered. I'd told them the western half of the country of South Vietnam was controlled by Communist forces from the DMZ right down to the Mekong Delta and they had been reinforced daily by large cadres staged in Cambodia and Laos. I'd told them, too, it was only a matter of time before the NVA would sweep down over the rest of the south and smother it like a swarm of locusts. Nothing would stop it. January 31, 1968 was the beginning of the end for us and they had considered it mere coincidence that I had sat there calmly predicting the fall of Saigon.

A man with sandy hair and green eyes had showed me pictures of the entire group and wanted to know if I could tell him where they were lost.

"Lost? They weren't lost, they were killed."

"Yes, but can you be certain?"

"As certain as certain can be."

Could I show him on the map?

"Three here. Six there and three wounded left behind."

"The lieutenant?"

"Definitely the lieutenant."

Had I seen with my own eyes that they were dead?

"Only six."

"Can you identify them from these pictures?"

"That one. That one. Those two. Those two."

There had been no names to go with the pictures. He'd wanted me to tell him stories about Vietnam but there was nothing I could have told him that he would understand. If he had been there and knew what it was like he wouldn't have had to ask.

Most people who were there don't talk about it much and when they do they prefer to talk about the bars and the girls, the drugs and the incredible amount of American money floating around, the black market and the parties. They don't often talk about the invisible enemy in black pajamas who could hide from the gunships, the AC-47s, the AC-54s, the AC-130s, and the Cobras with their Gatling guns and Vulcan twenty millimeter cannon that could fire 3000 rounds a minute from each gun. They don't talk about saturation bombing or napalm raids, or their buddies whom they left behind stacked in grey metal boxes at the edges of the runways. How does one explain a vision of Hell to one who has not seen it or experienced it?

I'd heard the fop fop fop of helicopter blades punishing the air and had gone to the window to watch an agency helicopter wobble into the sky leaving a group of men in business suits huddled on the pad. More of the big boys, I had thought, who push papers around and make strategic decisions and critical analysis, calculating this risk and that, sticking pins in a board on the wall and never asking questions until everything falls apart.

The sandy haired man with the green eyes had asked me then where I wanted to go for my next duty station and I couldn't tell him. I hadn't known. Somewhere. Anywhere away from there. I'd told him it really didn't matter anymore. I hadn't had time to grasp the reality that I was headed for a duty station in the United States. Too much of me had still been lost in Vietnam. He had told me that he would put in a good word for me, then he'd left. I found out later, after I had gotten to my next duty station, that all the men of the Recon Group had been officially listed as missing in action.

I had wondered briefly what had ever become of me.

* * * * *

That part of my mind that was keeping watch shook me back to awareness. I heard a noise up near the road and I

eased up to look out through the brush, risked a moment with the penlight, and saw it was fifteen minutes until seven. I could see a figure standing just at the edge of the road looking down into the clearing. He walked on down the road and after about a minute he reappeared to examine the clearing again.

He seemed to be trying to decide if he was at the proper location, and soon he made up his mind and began walking slowly and carefully down toward the concrete foundation. Although it was not light enough to see clearly, there was enough light for me to see that the man was carefully looking over the area around the old foundation. He walked to within five feet of my hiding place and stood for some time listening and watching, then went back to the other side of the foundation and examined a blind I'd built for him over there. He choose that as his waiting place and after he sat down I couldn't see him anymore unless he moved to get comfortable.

I could see the vapor from his breath every time he exhaled into the crisp, cold air, and I knew I'd have to be careful to conceal my own breath or he would soon detect the vapors rising from the brush. It was very cold that Sunday morning, and as it got brighter I could see the man was wearing a bright red mackinaw. We waited together, he in the freezing cold, I in my snug den. He got up several times and walked around trying to work the chill stiffness out of his limbs, and I peered out in every direction to make sure no one was creeping up on me from another direction. I was satisfied we were alone.

At ten minutes after eight Dansforth drove up and parked his car, got out and opened the passenger door, then walked down to the lake with Brandy.

EIGHT

Dansforth held her arm and helped her over the rough ground all the way down to the edge of the lake where they chatted casually, their breath coming in short little puffs when they spoke. They were both dressed warmly since it was quite cold and I decided it was probably time to get the delivery done to save Brandy any unnecessary discomfort. I slipped out the entrance of the hole and made my way to some scrub trees. Dansforth and Brandy could have seen me had they been looking, but the man in the bright red mackinaw couldn't see me because there were several large trees between us.

I adjusted the carbine and stepped from behind the trees, watching all three of them. For the first time I could see the man behind the blind was David Husky. He was carrying an Uzi and he pointed it directly at me when we made eye contact. He had the most bewildered look on his face and I knew he was wondering how I'd gotten so close to them without being seen. I stood there staring at him for half a minute then turned toward Dansforth, who was still unaware that I was standing only thirty feet behind him.

"Dansforth," I called softly, and they both jumped. Dansforth got the same bewildered look that Husky had, and Brandy didn't recognize me. She looked

puzzled, turned toward Dansforth to see if he would offer an explanation, then looked back at me.

"Richard," she cried out and ran toward me. Dansforth smiled and let her come, then followed. I took Brandy's arm and pushed her behind me toward some trees.

"Not yet," I said gently, "not yet." She was hurt and puzzled but then she saw the carbine and the uniform, and the intensity on my face, and she shrank back against the tree. I didn't take my eyes from Dansforth as he made his way to me, and Brandy sensed something dangerous and terrible was happening.

"You look as if you are prepared to go into battle," he smiled as he stopped three feet from me.

"I am."

He cocked his head and then his eyes began darting from side to side as he peered into the forest trying to locate anyone else.

"I'm not certain who my enemies are anymore," I added.

"Indeed?"

He pointed to the carbine. "Automatic?"

"Fully."

"A violation of Federal law, you know."

"I won't tell if you don't."

"What do you say we get on with our transaction. I think Miss Thomson is freezing." He rubbed his arms through his heavy coat.

"Over here," I said, walking backwards to the spot where I had buried the package. I pulled the trenching tool from the brush and began scooping the sand away. I kneeled in a position that I could see both Dansforth, standing about four feet away, and Husky behind the blind. Husky stood and watched intently as I unearthed the package then stood with it in my left hand. I reached back to the carbine, flicked off the safety, and put my hand near the trigger. If anything was going to happen, now was the time. Husky stepped out from behind the blind and walked softly as a cat toward us. I positioned Dansforth so he had his back to Husky as I handed him the box. I took Brandy by the hand and pulled her away from the tree, pointing to a spot where I wanted her to stand. She was rigid with fear.

"Well, I hope this is worth all the trouble you've put us through," I said, hoping to distract Dansforth so Husky could get closer. When he was about ten feet from us he stopped.

"Put the package down, comrade," he said.

Dansforth stiffened, his eyes frozen on mine. He cocked his head a little with a quizzical smile.

"I didn't guess," he said sadly.

I stepped back with the carbine pointed directly at his head.

"Put the package down and step away," I demanded. He placed the package down very gently beside the hole and stepped back.

"Over here!" I barked at him, indicating a place in the brush.

Husky held the Uzi steadily on

Dansforth as he squatted to retrieve the box. I moved around Dansforth carefully, looking for the slightest twitch until I was standing with Brandy beside the tree. Dansforth glared at me dully and his mouth was curled with hate and disgust. Husky stood with the box, smiling with satisfaction.

"The ultimate weapon," he said, "is not one which kills; it is one that enslaves."

I watched Dansforth's eyes flash. Damn him, he was going to make a move! I was certain he knew he would never reach his pistol before Husky cut him in two with the Uzi, but he was going to try. He almost turned his head. He almost looked away. He almost raised his hand. He almost stepped aside.

He never made it.

I jerked the wire in my left hand and grabbed Brandy, crushing her face tightly against my chest, holding her eyes away from the sight of the monstrous claw that reached out of the branches of the tree, fell like a plunging falcon upon an unsuspecting prey. The stakes caught Husky on the upswing, lifting him into the air like a child on a runaway swing, sending the Uzi and the box arching off into the brush. He was dead before he reached the top of the arc, his lifeless legs flopping loosely as if he were a rag doll thrown against a wall. Brandy wanted to turn and look but I held her fiercely, savagely against me, staring at Dansforth with hard, cold eyes.

He watched the lifeless body swing back and forth until it stopped, his hand frozen five inches from his lapel, his mouth open: his eyes white and round with horror. I watched him stonily, my jaw tight, my eyes unblinking until he turned his face toward me with tears in his eyes. I didn't have to look at the mangled corpse impaled upon that dreadful machine; I had seen such things before.

Dansforth dropped his hand, closed his mouth, and sighed a long, quivering sigh toward the sky. He lowered his face until his chin was against his chest and he breathed deeply several times through his mouth so he wouldn't get sick. He was pale and trembling. When he had composed himself he looked at me.

"How did you know?" he asked weakly.

"Talk to me next week, Dansforth. I am going to take this lady out of here and marry her, if she will have me." Brandy kept trying to push away from me so she could see what the noise had been but I wouldn't let her see that ugly, terrible thing. It is a sight one can never, ever forget. It is a scene that repeats itself endlessly in one's dreams from that moment on. I wouldn't let her see it because she would be no good to herself or anyone else after that. I dragged her with me, holding her head against my shoulder until we were at the top of the hill beside the road.

"What is it, what is it?" she kept asking. "What happened?"

But I wouldn't tell her, for even the explanation would be too ugly.

Dansforth went into the brush to get

the package and the Uzi, then followed us up the hill. I had Brandy in the front seat of his car when he got there and piled into the driver's seat. He placed the package on the back seat, then sat for almost ten minutes staring out of the windshield and reliving the scene of Husky's mutilated body swinging up into the trees and back again, lifelessly dragging through the pine needles; blood spraying everywhere like bright red raindrops. He would see the stakes that stabbed from the left eye, from the neck, and the six others that had pierced Husky's torso until the day he died. Every time he thought of it, saw it in his mind, he would feel the same overwhelming repugnance, and he would have to close his eyes, take deep breaths and force himself not to vomit.

"So is someone going to tell me what happened back there?" Brandy asked after watching him for awhile.

"No," I said, holding her close. "You're not going to find out so you might as well quit asking."

It was a hell of a way to meet again after so many months. I had imagined something warm and tender, something romantic in a quiet place with flowers and soft music, with gentle breezes and the sound of water falling somewhere. Here we were, sitting in the front seat of Dansforth's car with a dead man only a hundred feet away, in the middle of a wet and gloomy pine forest, and I hadn't even said hello or I love you or how was your trip. Nothing ever seems to turn out the way I dream it.

"God, I never saw anything like that," Dansforth whispered.

"Shut up, Dansforth."

I'm going to have to get someone in there to sweep up the mess," Dansforth said, "and there will be a lot of heat around here for the next few hours."

"Not yet," I protested. "I've go to get my stuff out of there first. I can be cleared out in twenty minutes if you will drive me to my truck."

He agreed to give me twenty minutes, no more, and then drove me down the road to the truck hidden in the brush. On the way, I asked him to take Brandy to my house and wait for me there.

He nodded.

It took four trips and less than twenty minutes to get up all my gear, including the boat, tossed into the truck. I carefully avoided looking at Husky as I worked. I pushed the brush and debris into the hole and went back to the truck, fired it up, and drove home.

They were waiting for me inside and Brandy had made a pot of coffee. She poured me a cup and I sat on the bar stool facing Dansforth. I placed the carbine across my thighs, removed all the rounds, then leaned it against the bar. Dansforth watched quietly.

"It looks as if you were prepared to make a stand out there. Were you planning on fighting the entire agency?"

"Were you planning on out-drawing the Uzi?"

"I thought for a minute you were with Husky. I didn't really know what I was going to do." He rubbed his eyes and sighed.

"He thought I was right from the be-

ginning."

How did you know you were. . .that he was the right man?"

"It was too obvious, Steve. Everything pointed to you as the spy. Everything Husky said, anyway. But I learned a long time ago to look around the obvious to the actual.

"You kept calling the house and you told me the phone wasn't bugged. You believed that. But the phone was bugged so it had to have been Husky's people who did it. He had men stationed outside my house to listen to our conversations. How do you think he knew we were going to be fishing that day we saw them at the boat ramp? By the way, what about Van Valkenburg and Blankenship?"

"We have them, but I think they are clean. They really didn't know what Husky was up to. They were just following orders. They thought they were going to catch a spy and go home heroes. He sipped his coffee and patted his pockets looking for a cigarette. I offered him one of mine.

"You can't tell me," he said presently, "that a tapped telephone was the only thing that convinced you Husky was your man. There had to be more than that."

"Of course. He told me that someone would come to get the package and inferred, without ever saying so, that person would be the spy. He wanted me to believe he was there to catch that spy. But he went for the box, and that was another thing that convinced me.

"Then, too, I had made a deal with him that I would not turn over the package until I knew Brandy was safe. You told me she was being held by captors unknown; he told me she was caught in a snowstorm in Texas. I was little puzzled when you showed up with her, but I figured he had sent for her and held her as ransom for the generator until I made my demand, and that he probably let someone in your office know where to find her so you could pick her up. It would look like you had abducted her. I knew that couldn't be the case when you got to the lake because you were too at ease, too casual. If she was being held against her will, tied or handcuffed for instance, I would have known it."

"I've been in a motel downtown for almost a week," Brandy said.

"Husky had her picked up the same day he agreed to your deal but he was holding her as insurance that you would give him the generator. I got a message to pick her up just before we went out to the lake."

Brandy was listening intently to all Dansforth and I had been saying, and she nodded in agreement to his statement.

"When I found out someone was holding Brandy," I said, "I knew the plans and the prototype for the generator were really in the box. No one would go to so much trouble for a piece of junk. I was going to throw it away, destroy it, and take my chances with the repercussions later but I realized that other plans and other generators had been made and are already in use." I pointed toward the ceiling.

Dansforth arched an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"I mean our government launched a top secret satellite a few days ago, and that satellite... ."

"Never mind," he interrupted. "I believe that falls within the realm of 'need to know'." He looked at Brandy.

"Sure." I lit a Marlboro. "Tell me, Dansforth, did you think any of us would leave there alive?"

"Hardly, but I thought I might have a chance until you indicated you were with him. I was going to try to take Husky out but I knew I couldn't get you both."

"You wouldn't even have gotten him. He would have nailed all of us before you could have reached inside your coat. That's why I had my own insurance."

He pursed his lips. "That's a hell of a way to go," he said softly.

"Ain't no easy way, friend." I went to the stove. "More coffee?" I fixed three more and went back to the bar stool.

"So, what happens now?"

"I've already called the janitors," he replied. "In a few hours there will be no trace of the incident. There will be questions and reports to make. Maybe in another week we can all move on to other things."

"I hope you will discreetly leave us out of this."

"If I can."

"Try."

"I will, but I can't promise anything. People will want to know about the mantrap. I don't know if I will be able to explain that to their satisfaction."

"Stranger things have been explained away." I got up and went to Brandy. "If nothing else, try to leave her out of it."

"I can probably do that, but I have a feeling some people will definitely want to talk to you. I'll try to steer them away but if I can't, well, I'm letting you know, warning you."

"Good enough." I looked at the box beside the couch. "What happens to that?"

"It will go back to Future Industries and in a few weeks everyone will have forgotten this ever happened."

"You recognized Husky, didn't you?"

"What?"

"You recognized Husky when you saw him that day at the boat ramp. You had seen him before and that's what wound you up so tight. You were gone for a week and you told me you had gone to San Diego. You went back to check out Husky."

"Yes. He was our man at the plant. He had no business being there and I went back to find out if he had been reassigned as a field operative to recover the generator."

"And he hadn't."

"They didn't even know where he was until I told them."

"So then you knew who he was and what he was after."

"But you really didn't know where I fit into the operation, did you?"

"I wasn't certain."

He finished his coffee and sat the cup down. "You were certainly everyone's prime suspect for awhile, but I realized you didn't know anything about it. Later I began to think you were just an uninformed accomplice.

"When you showed up like that, down by the lake, I figured I'd been had. You could have gotten yourself killed, you know."

"Well, it's like you said: saving the generator from a hostile foreign government is more important than our lives." I snuffed out the cigarette. "I'm not sure I really believe that but it is done now, anyhow. You know, Husky told me I fit into the plan because I was Roger's friend and they didn't have time to create a contact, someone who might logically receive the package. I didn't understand that at first, but then I realized he had done that, made the agency believe I really was a contact, to take the attention away from himself. That's when it really made sense. That's when I realized for the first time that the stuff inside the box was real. Despite all he told me after that, I knew he was the one who would ultimately go for the box.

"His plan was to kill us, Dansforth, and take the generator. Who would be looking for an agent when he had convinced everyone I was the spy? I'm sure he had his escape plans made and a few bodies in the forest wouldn't bother him at all. He would be out of the country long before anyone found us. He was determined to make it look like the spy was someone outside the agency, and by the time it was all untangled he would have his prize and be gone.

"He only needed an hour or two head start. He knew this would be his last assignment because he would be neutralized the minute the agency figured out what he'd done, but he knew it was worth it to get the generator.

"He had nothing to lose and the universe to gain if he pulled it off."

"Yes, and I believe Miss Thomson would have accompanied him to his destination, and then she would have been disposed of. The generator would simply have vanished. By the time the agency pieced it together, it would have been too late."

"Umm hmm. Tell me, who did he work for?"

"I'm not sure. He may have been acting on his own, hoping to sell to the highest bidder. It's one of the things we had hoped to learn. It would have been nice to know if there was a specific country at the end of his destination."

I thought about that for awhile. "You know, Dansforth, that machine there is a bad thing. Have you thought about what would happen to the world economy if it ever gets mass-produced?"

"Yes. I've also thought about what would happen if someone even threatened to market it. It won't be. Not in our lifetimes at any rate. It may be used for space exploration or undersea exploration in the near future but no sensible government would put it on the market, at least not until every other option had been played."

"Until then, it's just a weapon. I notice oil prices have already fallen. Might

there have been a little leak somewhere? Just a hint, maybe, that we have some experimental project in the closet? I notice, too, that the Soviets just shot down one of their own cruise missiles for some reason that has not been satisfactorily explained. Could it be that they are experimenting with a similar device?"

"I can't answer those questions."

"Can't or won't?"

"Can't. I don't know if there have been any leaks to oil producing nations, and I don't know what was aboard the Soviet missile. Other people analyze those things, not me."

"But you do know about Morningstar."

"I'm not going to discuss that," he said with a sigh, "and the less said about it, the better."

"Okay. Another question: What would have happened if Husky had accomplished what he set out to do?"

"I don't know. It would have made arms negotiations a thing of the past, that's for sure. It would have changed the course of history in ways we can't even imagine. It may have led us to another world war, or it may have made war forever impossible; I don't know."

We all sat there in silence for awhile thinking about that, and Brandy got up to make another pot of coffee.

"Shall I fix something to eat?" she asked.

We declined her offer. Less than two hours earlier we had all come within an ace of being killed and that was bearing down on us now. Brandy came back to stand beside me and I put my arm around her waist.

"That other man was killed, wasn't he?" she asked suddenly.

"It had to be done," I said, pulling her close.

"He would have killed us, Miss Thomson, and would have taken some very important things from us," Dansforth added.

He gathered up the package and stood.

"Well," he said, "the housekeepers should be on the job by now and I'll have some reports to prepare so I should be going. It was nice meeting you, Brandy."

I followed him outside to his car. He put the generator in the trunk and turned to me with his hand out.

"I owe you one, Richard," he said, "but I can't keep you out of this. You'll have to answer some questions just to tidy up the reports. You understand, don't you?"

"That's the way it's always been." I shook his hand. "I'll manage. All I ask is that you stall them for a week. I want to get married and have some time with Brandy."

He nodded solemnly and got into the car. He looked tired as he slumped there gripping the wheel.

"God, I hope I never have to see anything like that again," he said softly, then started the engine and drove away.

I waited him until he was out of sight, then walked back inside. Brandy was washing dishes and she looked up to watch me shiver off the chill.

"You said something back there about getting married?"

I smiled and embraced her tightly. "As soon as possible," I said. "As soon as possible." It was a good feeling.

NINE

The following week could not have been more perfect. The weather turned golden and Brandy and I went for walks or went driving for hours in the country, laughing and talking, and rediscovering each other. At the end of the week we were married by a Catholic priest who had been born in Russia, educated in India, and served as chaplain for the Scottish Grenadiers. It was a simple, ten minute ceremony with no guests. Dansforth was waiting for us when we went outside.

"I've arranged for all of Mrs. Constable's belongings to be shipped here, including her car," he said as he kissed her on the cheek and shook my hand. "Call it compensation for a job well done."

We chatted for awhile, then he excused himself, saying he still had reports to complete, and that he would call me in two days. Except for being a little over zealous, he wasn't a bad guy. His willingness to risk all his chips and everyone else's, too, bothered me, but that was an occupational characteristic classing him up there with the pros. He was dedicated, involved, committed.

Brandy was thrilled she was going to have her personal possessions, and began eyeing the bare walls and empty floor space covetously, mentally rearranging things into a harmonious picture. I didn't mind; the place desperately needed a woman's touch because it was austere and utilitarian.

We compared notes of the events of the past two weeks and I varnished over my side of the story, telling her only what I thought she needed to know. I wanted to forget the whole thing and get on with our lives, which promised to be long, loving, and happy, and considering the fruitless events of the preceding two years of my life, that seemed no less than a miracle.

I had driven over 23,000 miles in 1981 and 1982 trying to find myself and a reason for living after ending a marriage of twenty- eight years. I was filled with guilt and doubt and self-recrimination, and I was determined to find the answers to the many questions clouding my mind. I dropped out of society. I committed cultural suicide. I became a wandering gypsy living in a camper on the back of my 1965 Chevy pickup truck, and I drifted off into the hills and forests along the back roads of America trying to find some redeeming equation that could justify my existence.

I sometimes wonder how I survived those two friendless, rootless years. Out of contact with the rest of society, I became mired in my own maudlin thoughts and desperate dreams. Bitter, resentful, and angry at the world, I plunged deeper and deeper into a forced anonymity until even the beauty of the changing seasons became obscene, and the thousands of miles swept behind me without my having taken notice. I had my typewriter and my

books, and they were my only friends in the long autumn evenings up on the Lochsa and Selway Rivers when I would sit and write hundreds of pages of my thoughts by lantern light. When I reread them they seemed strange and alien as if they had been written by a rambling madman, someone I didn't, couldn't know.

In a way, that was true. I woke in the morning of December 30, 1982 beside the road south of Hopkinsville, Kentucky frozen into the camper, and decided it was time to head for warmer climates. I had punished myself long enough and realized it was time to get on with my life, so I headed for Southern California, for San Diego.

That's where I met Brandy. She was forty-two, tall and fair, with auburn hair and green eyes. She had been divorced and working at the same futureless job for sixteen years. Her kids, like mine, were grown and gone and, like me, she lived alone. We were two lonely people just waiting to meet each other, but I had panicked and had run away, afraid to make another commitment, fearing another mistake. Now, eight months later, we were married and I was sitting at home, watching her bake chocolate chip cookies, with a smudge of cookie flour on her cheek. It seemed unreal.

"What are you smiling about" she asked.

"I was just thinking back, and thinking how happy I am now. I'm glad things turned out the way they did, despite those shaky two weeks."

"Me, too." She got her cookie sheet into the oven and came over to sit beside me.

"When all this business with Dansforth is finished, can we go somewhere for awhile?"

"If the weather stays nice, I'll put the camper on the truck and we can go hide out in the boonies for a month or two."

"That would be nice," she said with a shy smile. "I've never been camping before. Maybe we could go down to the Keys."

We talked and planned and made lists of the things we would want to take on our first trip together, then went out to inspect the camper in the backyard. She opened all the cupboards and closets and said she could put this here and that in there, we would need this much food, that many blankets, boots, and warm coats. By evening she had our trip planned with the precision of a military operation, then we showered and fell into bed happy and content.

It began to rain Sunday night and it was cold and dreary at nine a.m. Monday morning, the fourth of February when Dansforth called. He apologized for waking us but wondered if I could go to the Federal Building to answer some questions so he could submit his reports.

"It will take an hour or so," he explained, "and we will have to interview you privately, so please come alone. We can't entertain Mrs. Constable."

Now we were back to interviews. I agreed to be there at 10:30 and lay back on my pillow.

"Dansforth?" she asked sleepily.

"Yeah. I have to go answer some questions, but I should be back by noon."

I was early and a secretary ushered me into an austere, windowless interrogation room to wait. I opened the desk drawer and pulled out an ashtray, then sat down and lit a Marlboro. I was just putting it out five minutes later when Dansforth walked in looking cheerful but a little nervous.

"Well," he said. "How is married life?"

"Most intelligent thing I've ever done," I answered. "I'm happy, really happy, for the first time in years."

"I'm glad to hear that."

He checked his watch and sat down. "It will be a few minutes before we can begin. An analyst from our Washington station is here and he'll be asking you some questions. Just tell him what you know, the truth, from your point of view, about the events of the past weeks. It won't take long."

"What kind of questions will he ask?"

"How you became involved, I imagine. Your thoughts about Husky and the events prior to and during his death."

"Does he know I rigged the mantrap?"

I sat back and eyed him closely. He was jumpy, alternately looking at his watch and the door.

"Yes, but don't worry about that. Uh. . .he, well, he understands it was necessary." He checked his watch again and shifted nervously on the chair.

We sat quietly for a few minutes until the door opened and a man with sandy hair and green eyes came in. Dansforth stood to introduce us. "This is Richard Constable," he said. "Richard, this is... ."

"Spenser Halsey," I finished.

The two men looked at each other, then back at me. Dansforth was puzzled.

"You know me?" the sandy haired man asked.

"Saigon. January thirtieth, 1968, was the last time you came to visit me. The day before the TET Offensive. You interrogated me at Ton Son Nuht a few hours before I was flown out. Glad to see you survived it."

"That is remarkable. I have to admit I didn't remember you until I read your dossier. That was seventeen years ago."

"And five days."

"What?"

"Seventeen years and five days."

He put his briefcase on the table and they both sat down.

"I wouldn't have believed, given the state of your health and your mental condition, that you could remember that day. Or that you would want to."

I stared at the No Smoking sign on the wall. "Difficult to forget a thing like that," I answered. "We stood at the window and watched a Huey unload three men and you asked me where I wanted to go for my next tour of duty. You were wearing dark trousers and a short sleeved white shirt. No tie. Your hair was shorter then and you were, maybe, twenty pounds lighter. You had on black, low cut oxfords. The room was cold." I looked back at him. "I was a

prisoner. Hard to forget a thing like that."

"I'd hardly say you were a prisoner," Halsey corrected.

"That's because you could leave when you wanted."

Dansforth, sensing that I was growing hostile, held up a hand to end the conversation.

"We have a few questions to ask, Richard, and the sooner we get this over with, the sooner you can go back home."

I exhaled through pursed lips and relaxed. "Okay, let's get it done."

Halsey spread out some papers and two dossiers. He pushed a picture across the table and raised an eyebrow. It was an agency picture of Husky.

"David Husky," I said.

He took it and pushed another. It was Husky on a slab in a morgue. I looked at it dispassionately, then glanced at Dansforth. He was looking at the floor. It was a gruesome picture. I shrugged. What did they expect me to say?

"Is it the same man?" Halsey asked.

"I don't know. He's pretty badly mutilated."

"It isn't necessary to pretend you know nothing about this, Mister Constable," he said, holding up a hand. "We have the report. Tell me if you believe this is the same man you identified as David Husky."

I looked at Dansforth but he wouldn't meet my eyes.

"Yeah," I said, "that's the same guy."

"When was the last time you saw him alive?"

"Sunday morning, the twenty-fourth of January, 1985. We were all at Lake Elizabeth."

"What events transpired that morning?"

I told him everything that happened from the time I had seen Husky enter the clearing to the time Dansforth, Brandy, and I had left, and I explained the reasons why I felt all our lives were in danger. Halsey listened quietly without interrupting until I was finished.

"As it turns out," he said, "you were correct in believing Husky was the double agent. Agent Dansforth confirms that all of you would undoubtedly have been killed and we would have lost the merchandise. So it was necessary, but unfortunate, that Husky had to be terminated for we are left with a problem, namely, there were others involved and we don't know who they are. We had hoped to follow Husky and monitor the movements of several other people to see if any of them made a move.

"They are, no doubt, wondering why Husky hasn't made an appearance and until he does, they will take care not to expose themselves.

"In other words, we are back to square one. We don't know who we're after."

"We are certain there are other agents still at Future Industries," Dansforth added, "and we have to find out who they are."

I could see what was coming and I didn't like it a bit. I pulled out another Marlboro and lit it. Halsey stiffened and

Dansforth looked uncomfortable.

"I would prefer that you didn't smoke that in here," Halsey said coldly.

"Great," I replied, getting up. "I'll smoke it on the way home. I don't want to be here anyhow."

I headed for the door but Dansforth stopped me.

"Sit down, Richard," he said apologetically. "We have to work this out."

"You can work it out without my help. You've been doing it for years. What do you think I can do for you? Get out of my way."

"We were hoping you would help us wrap up the operation."

"What gave you that idea? Did I ever say I wanted to help you do anything? This is your idea and you already know how I feel about your operations. I want no part of it."

Halsey motioned me back to the table and Dansforth, who was holding my arm, managed a weak smile as he nodded for me to sit down. I knew if I sat down I was in. I should have told them what I thought of them, should have told them what to do with the operation. But I didn't. I went back and sat down.

Halsey cleared his throat and shuffled the papers, then held up his little finger, measuring it off to the first digit with his thumb.

"The Soviets are that far from perfecting their own facsimile of the generator. They have managed that with technology we developed and which has been sold to them by someone at Future Industries. They have parts of the formulas and they have guessed at the rest of it. They have already tested their own version but it failed and it won't take too long to get the rest of the technology to perfect it if we don't find the person or persons inside the plant.

"Do you understand that? We can't scrap the project now, even if we wanted to. We must go on with it and we must be the first to perfect it. We can only do that if we find out who is selling our secrets. We would like your help in doing that."

"Then it hasn't been perfected yet?"

"Not completely. As an engine it's excellent. It has no limits. It could travel at the speed of light, perhaps beyond the speed of light, if we had something to use it in, but as a guidance system, a navigation system, well, it has some flaws. You were in R and D so you know how that goes.

"It will be worked out eventually but we need that time. Another week. Another month. You see what I'm saying?"

"So that's why the cruise missiles, ours and theirs, keep going astray?"

"How do you know about the cruise missiles?"

"I was there when they tested the first ones; read the dossier. The rest was guesswork."

"Agent Dansforth tells me you have an uncanny knack for making those kinds of deductions." He looked at Dansforth, then back at me.

"You know about the Morningstar Satellite?"

"More guesswork," I replied. "It was just logical reasoning. I'm surprised

the newspapers and television people haven't picked up on it. Maybe they have."

"No, I don't think so or we would have seen it in print somewhere. They have no sense of values when it comes to national security."

"Just a minute, Halsey." I said hotly, snuffing out the cigarette. "I happen to believe that the press and other media have the right, and even the duty, to report what they believe to be important, newsworthy stories, and as long as we are disparaging people for their sense of values, perhaps you should look into your own. If I remember correctly, the press and television did a manifestly better job of reporting the conflict in Vietnam than did any government agency. Still are, for that matter."

"Regardless," he said, "some things must be done discreetly and in good time. I don't wish to get into a shoving contest with you over the merits and flaws of journalism, however. There are more important matters which we must address at the moment."

He waved his hand in front of his face as if that erased everything, and began with a completely new thought.

"You spent a considerable amount of time in the jungles of Vietnam on Long Range Patrol, Operation Green Dragon, and you recently spent two years living out of the back of a pickup truck."

He curled his lips as if he had smelled something foul or thought that was not playing the game. "The point is, you are comfortable in the wilderness. You rate marksman with the MIA-I Carbine. You've qualified with the service .45 pistol and the .38 revolver. You've been trained to use explosives and incendiaries.

"You speak four languages. You're an expert with the longbow and the crossbow. You're a qualified diver. And here I read that you can also fly airplanes. You know international codes. You can pilot boats, ride motorcycles, drive large trucks and heavy equipment.

"You've been a writer, an artist, a newspaper editor, and a still and motion picture cameraman. You flew third crewman position in RA3Bs. It says here you read as many as three hundred books a year and you have remarkable recall."

He put the dossier down and looked at me intently, pulling at his bottom lip. Dansforth sat with his hands folded in the praying position. Neither of them spoke for a full minute, then Halsey narrowed his eyes and leaned forward.

"You might be considered a dangerous man, Mister Constable. Last week you added to your list of rather remarkable accomplishments by dispatching a very clever and dangerous agent by rigging a mantrap that worked so swiftly and silently he had no chance to escape.

"Yes, if I didn't know for certain that you were on our side I would recommend your name be placed on our list of very dangerous persons."

He sat back and let me think that over but I already knew what he was telling me. Cooperate or else.

I wished I had kept my service .45.

It was useless to try to argue with his coercive proposal. For a second I was back in that cold room at Ton Son Nuht facing the same man and there was no way out. I sat and waited for one of them to speak.

Dansforth seemed embarrassed by his boss's attempt to coerce me into working with them. He knew me well enough by that time to understand that if I was sitting there listening to the plan, I was willing to help.

"If you hadn't decided to take matters into your own hands," Halsey continued, "we would now have an opportunity to follow Husky's accomplices and we would soon have this thing over and done with."

"And if your people had informed me better I would have known what you were trying to do, and I wouldn't have staged that mess in the forest. It occurred to me more than once that you wouldn't have cared if Brandy and I were both killed as long as you could catch your spies.

"At one point I came within an ace of dusting all of them. You want me to work with you? Keep me informed. Otherwise, there might be a lot of dead meat out there where you don't want it. I'm not going to let anyone, your team or the other, walk up and kill me without having to pay a price, understand that."

"Wait, Richard," Dansforth said, bolting forward and holding my arm, "nobody is going to put you in that kind of situation again. We weren't sure whose side you were on, remember that. Now relax and listen to what we have to say."

"So far, all I've heard is that Halsey, here, wants to put my name on the most wanted list, and I resent the hell out of that. I didn't learn all those skills in some clandestine army out in the hills somewhere. I learned them as part of my legitimate military training before and after I went to Vietnam. If that's a crime, prosecute the Joint Chiefs of Staff, not me."

"I'll let agent Dansforth explain the operation to you, since you seem to have reached some sort of rapport." Halsey said. He stuffed the papers into his briefcase and headed for the door, then turned to Dansforth.

"I'll expect some periodic reports of your progress on this matter," he said, then walked out before Dansforth could respond.

"Okay, he's hardheaded and he made a bad beginning," Dansforth said when he saw the disgust on my face, "but we can accomplish our goals in spite of that if we trust each other, confide in each other, and work together on this thing. We have put an operation together and if you understand it and can pursue it diligently, we can wrap it up in short time. Agreed?"

"What do you consider a short time?"

"A couple of weeks at the outside. We have set the stage for the operation so you will have the best chance to accomplish your mission."

He got up and motioned for me to follow him, then led me down the maze

of bare hallways and stairwells to a room on the lower level. There was a guard on duty there and I had to sign a register and pin a badge on my jacket. The guard unlocked the room and we went in. It was obviously a property room and Dansforth disappeared behind a rack of shelves after motioning me to a chair. When he came back he was carrying a wooden box which he placed on a table.

"What you are going to see is top secret and you are not to reveal the contents of this box to anyone, nor are you to repeat our conversation, even to your wife. Understood?"

I nodded and he opened the box.

"In a few days," he said, "a cruise missile will be launched from an aircraft at the China Lake Test Range. It has been programmed to purposely go off course and land in the desert south of the Salton Sea near Superstition Mountain. You're familiar with the area?"

"I lived there for sixteen years."

"Yes. On board the missile will be a signal device which will emit a radio frequency you can detect with this." He pulled a small receiver from the box and placed it on the table for me to examine.

"This switch turns it on. This meter shows the intensity of the signal and this one shows the direction from which the signal is coming. It has a range of twenty-five miles and by following the pointer you can pinpoint the downed missile with great accuracy. You will... ."

"Why twenty-five miles?"

"What?"

"Why does the thing have a range of twenty-five miles? Surely you don't expect me to search twenty-five miles of desert looking for it?"

"No, no. Let me finish. You will be there long before the missile is launched. We will notify you well in advance so you will be the first person on the scene. We chose the site because it is in a restricted area and there will be little chance anyone will observe the missile when it comes down.

"You can begin tracking the missile while it's still airborne so you'll know approximately where it's going to hit before impact. Time is important. Within a few minutes after the launch several people will know it has gone off course, and within half an hour a search will be under way.

"The launch is scheduled for late afternoon, and it will be dark before anyone reaches the landing site, so you'll have an advantage of ten to twelve hours. That should give you plenty of time to reach the crash site ahead of anyone else.

"When you find the missile, you are to locate certain components and replace them with these." He pulled an avionics device from the box and laid it on the table.

"Number one. This is the on-board computer. Number two. This is the Cascade Generator." He held up a polished metal cylinder about the size of a three pound coffee tin.

"Number three. This is the flight recorder. All these components will be

together if the aircraft lands intact."

He showed me the quick disconnects and illustrated how the components formed a small, compact unit when connected. "Here is a driver for the Dzus fittings on the fuselage."

He produced a blueprint of a Tomahawk Cruise Missile and spread it out on the table, pointing to the empennage. "Here is the access panel where these components will be located. There are twelve fasteners. Here is a diagram of the components and their location inside the airframe. Loosen these nuts and remove the three parts, then replace them with these. We will provide all the tools you will need to accomplish the job." He sat back and looked at me casually.

"Any questions?"

I picked up the cylinder and turned it over several times. There was a series of holes in one end of the heavy can, otherwise it was quite smooth.

"You're telling me this little can is the engine for the Stealth fighters and bombers?"

"Yes," he said, taking it from me. "You must handle it carefully. See this screw here?" He indicated a partially set screw near one of the connectors. "Before you assemble and mount these in the airframe, you must tighten these screws." He pointed to a screw on the flight recorder, and to one on the computer. "Once you tighten them, do not loosen them again. They activate explosive devices inside."

I gave him a curious look and thought about that for awhile.

"Are these components real?" I asked.

"Not the generator."

"Then why the explosives? What will you gain by killing the spy?"

"It isn't the agents we're after. We know the agents who recover these won't tamper with them. We want them to take them out of the country. Their engineers will examine them after they reach their destination."

"So you're going to put a halt to their research by taking out their team?"

"Essentially. It will delay them for months, perhaps a year, and that may give us the time we need to perfect our own system." Dansforth was quite candid about the whole thing.

"Doesn't that seem unnecessarily nefarious to you?"

"I didn't create this scheme, Richard. My job is to see that it is carried out as it was planned."

"But if these things are not real, and if a foreign government could gather no useful information from them, why the overkill? Halsey just said the Soviets are that close to developing their own generator, but what if the people who are after this thing aren't the Soviets? What if it's someone else? Private industry, for example."

"You sound as if you are trying to say you don't want to cooperate with us on this."

"No, I'm not saying that, but what happens if somebody rides by in a dune buggy and decides to take the thing apart? We have a dead citizen to explain away and the spies hit the trail. What

does that accomplish?"

"Part of your job is to see that doesn't happen."

"Oh, I'm supposed to hang around and make sure the bad guys are the only ones who screw with it, is that the plan?"

"That's about it."

I looked at the avionics devices on the table and chewed my lip.

"You know, Steve," I said, "when I was living in my camper, my life was simple. I had two tee-shirts and two pairs of trousers, and I ate out of the same pan I cooked my food in. I moved when I wanted or I stayed put. I fished. I stood as naked as Adam under the trees and took a cold bath out of a bucket.

"It was a lonely life but I slept well, know what I mean? I didn't have many reasons to live then, and I could have done just about anything I wanted, except get back in the Navy because I was already too old.

"I even applied for a job with your agency, but they turned me down for the same reason. That's the truth. Told me they had no need of my services. I've still got the letter.

"Now, after I'm married and have a happy life, you want me to work for you. Why didn't the agency hire me when I was looking for a job? Why now, for the love of God?"

"Well, you applied and we kept your name. We didn't need you then; now we do."

If it hadn't been so ludicrous, I would have laughed. "But now I don't want to work for you."

"Okay, Richard," he said, "after this one, you won't have to work another operation if you don't want to. I'll have your name taken from the files. That's a promise."

"Right, Dansforth. You're going to have my name taken from the files because I'll be dead. Who are you trying to kid?"

"Richard, don't try to make this seem so melodramatic. With reasonable diligence and care, you can get in, pick up the avionics packages, and get out, and no one will even know you've been there. That's your turf, if anyone can survive out there, it's you."

"If this junk is just going to be laying around out there in the desert and you know where it's going to be, why don't you send some of your own people in to get it?"

"We can't jeopardize the project by using our operatives. Can you imagine the stink if anyone, anyone, found out the agency was involved in looking for a missile out there?

"You, on the other hand, a private citizen on vacation; who would give you a second thought if they noticed you nosing around out in the boonies?"

"So the agency is willing to risk the whole project on someone who has never been on an intelligence operation before?"

"You've been on intelligence operations before, Richard."

I held up a hand. "Recon is not, I repeat not, the same thing as international intrigue."

"The enemy is the same everywhere. If you can elude one, you can

elude another."

I got up and walked to the end of the room and back. "I'll be encountering an enemy then?"

"Not if you do your job quickly and get out before anyone knows you've been there."

"Umm hmm. Sure. That's another way of telling me some undesirable may get there ahead of me, right?"

"Possible, but not likely."

"Perhaps we had better discuss some of these not too likely possibilities. Give me a for instance, if you don't mind." I went back to my chair and sat down.

"Okay," he said, pulling out a Salem and lighting up. "Here's one, but remember that it's only a remote possibility. The missile might not land as near you as we might hope, and you may have to search for some time before you find it. You'll have to do that in the dark and that will slow you down considerably.

"If the signal emitter is damaged upon impact you won't have the use of the direction finder to help you and you'll then have to search on a dead reckoning course from the direction of the last signal you receive.

"The signal generator is quite sturdy and should survive even if the missile actually crashes, but nothing is indestructible. If that happens, however, you are to use every means available to you to locate the missile."

"What if I arrive and find someone has already been there?"

"Report it at once and make every attempt to locate them."

"And what if I can't find them?"

"We will take it from there, and your responsibility will be ended."

I lit a Marlboro and watched the smoke drift up toward the ceiling.

"Okay, what if I get there and find two or three people dismantling the avionics?"

"Determine first who they are. If they are private citizens, you must advise them to leave the area at once after recovering any components they might have taken."

"And if they refuse to leave?"

"Consider them hostile and terminate them."

"What if they turn out to be a bunch of rednecked boozers from the low desert claiming finders keepers?"

"I'm sure you'll be able to figure that out before you commit yourself."

"Oh, great, Dansforth," I growled, thinking that I really should be committed. "You say that so casually, but what if I dust some innocent souvenir hunters?"

"Complete your job, cover your tracks, and get out."

"I gather I will get no help from the agency."

"You have one task, Richard," he said, snuffing out the Salem. "Recover the avionics I have shown you and replace them with these. If you encounter any problems during your mission you will have to use your own intuition and cunning to avoid detection, capture, or death. If that means killing a bunch of

obstinate asses, do it."

He held up both hands.

"Beyond that, I cannot help you. The agency cannot be involved."

TEN

Dansforth led the way out of the property room and I followed him to the parking lot where he stopped beside a motor home and began fishing in his pocket for a key.

"This is your vehicle," he said as he went inside, "and before you start complaining, let me tell you it has everything you need to accomplish your mission. Come over here."

He showed me radio transmitters and receivers, cameras, night scope, several weapons, a computer, and a map case full of large scale maps of the area where the missile was supposed to land. He demonstrated how to extend the dish antenna on the roof and the proper frequencies to operate the radios, then opened the closets and cupboards and showed me the stock of food and supplies for the trip. Everything was supplied, including clothing and linens, tools and camping gear, dishes and utensils.

He told me I'd get credit cards for fuel and telephone, and five thousand dollars in cash when they delivered the rig to the house. Then he showed me how to operate everything in and on the vehicle. When he was finished he invited me to join him at the dinette.

"Any questions?" he asked with a broad smile.

"A couple. Wouldn't it be easier and cheaper to have someone in California do this job?"

"We don't want anyone else to know about this, Richard. Too many know already. You're it."

"When do I leave?"

"How about tomorrow morning bright and early? The weather is lousy all across the south right now, and it may take you a week to get there if you don't have any problems. The launch is scheduled for Friday, the fifteenth. That will give you three or four days to find a suitable place in the desert to set up your camp. Think you can make it?"

"Sure. Are you going to deliver this thing to me?"

"Sometime this afternoon. We'll get everything on board and have it serviced so all you'll have to do is drive it away. Anything else?"

I looked around the motor home and shrugged. "Well, if I think of anything. I'll let you know: I looked at my watch. It was half past twelve.

We shook hands outside the motor home and Dansforth went back into the building. I walked around the vehicle and found a 650cc Yamaha hanging on the back. It was a big bike with nobbies and an oversized gas tank. I knew right then they didn't expect the missile to fall into my lap.

On the way home I did some thinking. Spenser Halsey didn't act like an analyst, he was too pushy. Dansforth, who enjoyed doing some pushing of his own once in awhile, was almost afraid of Halsey and did nothing to prevent Halsey from threatening me. He even

defended Halsey's coercion by his inaction.

I catalogued Halsey as the Director of D.I.C.E. the minute he told Dansforth he wanted periodic reports of our progress. This was Halsey's operation and he was going to make certain it went off the way it had been planned.

I guess the operation made sense if I thought about it the way they did: the best way to catch the spies was to give them the opportunity to snatch the Cascade Generator and watch them every step of the way.

But what if they didn't take the bait? What if the wrong people showed up and all the government got for its time and money was a bunch of local bikers out for a cruise in the desert? What if the spies got there first? If they were as close to the project as Dansforth had led me to believe, what would prevent them from installing their own guidance system in the missile and sending it anywhere they wanted? With the Cascade Generator driving it, it could fly around for years, or come down thousands of miles from China Lake and we never would find it.

Even if it did land in the desert where Dansforth told me it would, and if the spies knew where it was going to be, they could be waiting in the exact spot and recover the avionics at their leisure. I might be able to track them out of the desert, but if I could track them, they could just as easily track me.

Dansforth and Halsey were counting on my ability to cover my tracks to make it look as though I hadn't been there, but I knew the spies could do the same thing. What if they replaced the avionics with their own explosive devices?

All in all, it seemed pretty risky to me. I was also having a tough time believing they had no one on the coast who could be trusted with the job, but stranger things have happened. If everything worked as they had planned, I would find the missile, make the switch, and exit the scene. Then the subversives would show up, grab the components, and take them to their destination where they would explode.

It seemed too simple and something about it just didn't seem quite right, but I couldn't put my finger on it. Brandy was waiting for me when I got home and she fixed lunch while I told her we were going on vacation sooner than we had planned. I decided to wait until we were on the road to tell her the entire story but I told her about the motor home and where we were going, and she guessed that it was part of the business with Dansforth.

"Is it going to be dangerous?" she asked.

"I don't think so. I wouldn't let you go if I thought there was any danger."

"Hey," she scowled, "remember last week? I was down there in the woods and you can't tell me that wasn't dangerous."

"Yeah, that was dangerous, but someone else brought you into it."

"Are you going to take that rifle?"

"Yes, but I always take it when I go camping."

"If you're taking the rifle, it's going

to be dangerous." She stabbed a finger at me to punctuate her remark.

"Darling, I said, "if it's dangerous to the point of death or injury, we will simply leave. All I have to do is recover some electronic devices and get out without being seen. It'll be easy, I promise."

"Well, then, I'd better get some things packed if we're leaving in the morning." She kissed me tenderly and I embraced her.

"I love you, Richard."

I pressed my face into her hair. "And I love you," I whispered. "We have all night to pack; why don't you sit here with me? I haven't seen you all day."

"We'll have all night and all next week for that," she said, flashing me a sly grin. "I don't want to be in bed when Dansforth comes rolling in here with the motor home."

We got busy packing and discussing the trip, and I began to think of it as a real vacation. Maybe I'd been too pessimistic about it. Sometimes I was too logical and paranoid about everything. What I needed was to relax and enjoy a holiday at the government's expense. Enjoy the trip, enjoy the sights; make it a real vacation and have some fun with Brandy. In a week it would all be over and we could take our time coming home, maybe cruise down to Rosarita Beach, Mexico before we headed back.

At 5:30 the coach rolled into the yard followed by Dansforth in an agency sedan and we went out to meet them. Dansforth showed Brandy through the rig and she was delighted. She opened the cabinets and closets, and looked over the food supply with little sounds of approval, but she made a sour face when she saw the rack of weapons.

"Don't worry," Dansforth told her, "we have this operation planned so well I doubt if Richard will even have to take these out of the closet."

She shrugged and sat at the dinette, trying it out for comfort. Dansforth motioned for me to sit beside her and took a seat facing us. He introduced the driver, then had him make some coffee. He pulled a briefcase from a cabinet and sorted through some papers, sliding out the registrations, titles, insurance vouchers, credit cards and an envelope of cash. It made quite a pile.

"The keys for the dirt bike are on the key ring. You have registrations for both vehicles, and the titles and insurance as well. You will have to return them when the operation is completed, but for all intents and purposes, they are legally yours until that time. The weapons registrations and permits are in the white envelope."

He pulled out a large manila envelope and slid it across to me. I knew exactly what was in it.

"Here are your instructions. Read them carefully. You will find several radio frequencies listed in there, and you will be required to call on those frequencies at certain designated times unless you aren't able to do so for some reason. Understand?"

I nodded, thumbing through the folder. It was a step by step program of the operation, giving dates, times, loca-

tions, names of contacts, and explicit instructions on removing and replacing the avionics systems aboard the Tomahawk. I closed the envelope and looked at Dansforth with some skepticism.

"Whose idea was this, Dansforth?" I asked.

"Halsey gets the credit for this one. Why?"

"Doesn't it seem to you to be rather elaborate? And risky? I can think of several reasons why this might not work." I told him some of the reasons but he remained convinced the plan was foolproof, pointing out that I would have a distinct advantage since I knew where the missile would land, and had the homing device to pinpoint it.

"Okay," I said, "but I hope Halsey won't be too upset if I deviate from the plan when or if things don't go according to his schedule."

"Not at all. This is just a schedule of events as they are supposed to occur, and you should exercise your own judgement in carrying out the operation. Now I'd like you to sign these papers."

He handed me a list of all the properties, from the motor home to the last pillow case, they were giving us to use. It was two pages long. I signed it and gave it back.

"I hope I don't have to account for every can of food," I said wearily.

"You've done this before, I see."

The agent who had driven the motor home brought a pot of coffee and some cups, then went up to sit in the driver's seat to relax. Dansforth looked at Brandy.

"Do you think you can drive this thing?" he asked.

"I believe I can," she replied, "if someone will show me all the gadgets."

"Good. Richard will be quite busy reading instructions and familiarizing himself with different aspects of the operation so you'll have to spend considerable time behind the wheel. I hope you don't mind,"

"Not at all. I think I'll rather enjoy it."

"Why don't you go forward and let agent Crawford explain the mechanics to you. I want to talk to Richard for a minute."

She left us and got busy learning how to make everything work, then Dansforth turned to me.

"It was Halsey's idea to have her go along, Richard. I hope you don't mind."

"I was planning on taking her anyhow," I shrugged. "We've only been married a week; you don't think I'd sail off to the desert and leave her here, do you?"

"Knowing you, I should have expected that." He glanced over the papers I had signed and put them in his briefcase. He seemed a little uneasy.

"There, uh, may be some danger, Rich. More, perhaps, than we indicated earlier, and I don't want you to take any unnecessary risks, especially now that Brandy is involved."

"She's a big girl; she can take care of herself."

"How much does she know?"

"That we're going to California

where I'm going to pick up some things from the desert, and that's about all. She made some guesses but I haven't told her the whole story."

"Can she handle a weapon?"

"She'll know how by the time we get there." I pulled out a Marlboro and lit it.

"She already knows how to operate that stuff, the radios and computer, better than I do. That was her job in San Diego. I'll teach her the rest of it before we get to the desert."

"Well, I'll leave that up to you. I don't think it will be necessary, but you never know what might happen out there. If nothing else, she can stand watch while you pull the avionics."

"Sure." I poured another cup of coffee and offered some to Dansforth but he declined, holding his stomach and making a sour face.

"One thing is really bothering me, Steve," I said after I had the coffee fixed.

"Shoot."

"Well, I just can't get it out of my head that this whole thing is too elaborate. Even if it made sense to send us all the way out there, which it most certainly does not, it makes no sense at all to send all this with us." I waved a hand at the motor home.

"Why not fly us out there and let us rent a car, make the switch, and fly us home?"

"Because you have to look harmless, innocent. That area is a favorite spot for campers and bikers, you know that. You're supposed to blend in and become part of the landscape. And you need all the radio gear to stay in contact."

"Who, ultimately, will receive the radio messages?"

"Me, for one."

"And Halsey, for two."

"Yes, Halsey. He's the primary agent on the operation."

"I suppose he feels he should know what's going on every moment?"

"Daily reports, hourly reports; he's very thorough."

"Yeah, I know the type. I hope he doesn't get so busy shuffling papers that he loses track of the purpose of the mission and forgets we're real people with human frailties."

"Well, he does expect certain things to be done, and done his way, and he will use whatever methods are convenient to accomplish his goals."

"Convenient? I don't call extortion convenient."

"Come on, Richard, that's too harsh. Call it a timely use of available resources."

"Semantics." I finished the coffee and waved a hand at the motor home. "Is this his idea, too?"

"For the most part. Now look, Richard, I know you are used to operating with very little and this may seem elaborate, to use your own words, but these are things which we consider necessary for the successful completion of the task. The weapons are primarily for self defense, the radio gear is to help you stay in contact or call for a backup if necessary, and the cameras are to record the movements of the persons who take the

avionics. You need all of it."

"Wait a minute," I said, holding up a hand. "You want me to hang around long enough to take pictures of these jokers?"

"The Canon has a Questar lens, Richard. You can sit a mile away and see them as if you were ten feet from them. The other camera has the night scope which you can use to help you locate the missile after dark, or to use for surveillance. I think you'll find everything very useful if it comes to push and shove."

"Have you ever been out there in the desert, Steve?"

"No, I haven't had the pleasure."

"It isn't a pleasure. That isn't flat land out there. There are sand dunes, even mountains, and dry washes crisscross the entire area. What if the missile lands in an area where I can't see it with the scope? Or if I do find it and it is down in a wash, I can't very well sit a mile away and observe any goings on, can I?"

"Do your best and don't worry about it," he said, snapping the briefcase shut. "We will have the situation under control on this end." He rose and straightened his jacket.

"Any more questions?"

I looked at Brandy and Crawford who were waiting for our conversation to be ended.

"Obviously not," I said.

"Good. We'll be leaving then. You have my phone number in case you need to call. Stay in contact at all times. Good luck."

I stood to shake his hand, then he turned to Brandy.

"Good night, Mrs. Constable, and thank you."

Brandy came over to the table to sit beside me, and we watched the two agents drive away. I looked at her and smiled.

"Have you got this thing figured out yet?" I asked.

"I think so," she answered, and told me what she guessed from the pieces of conversation she had overheard. By the time she was finished, I knew she had pretty well put it together, so I filled her in on the rest. She didn't seem concerned about the possible dangers and that pleased me. She was even confident we could pull it off just the way Dansforth had outlined it, but she also knew we weren't going on a leisurely vacation without problems. We sat in the darkness for awhile and she laid her head against my shoulder.

"Something is bothering you, isn't it?" she asked quietly.

"I'm sorry if I drifted away. Yes, something is bothering me, but I'm not sure what it is." I put my arm around her and pulled her close.

"I've been on crash sites before," I continued, "and unless Halsey has told the authorities to stay away, I know the Army, the Navy, the Marines, the National Guard, the FAA, the FBI, the CIA, the fire department, and every available law enforcement officer in Imperial County is going to converge on that piece of stove and cordon off the area. If they do, we won't get within fifteen miles of it.

"It may take them awhile to find it

because the thing flies under radar and only a very few people are supposed to know where it's going. They are supposed to launch it toward the northeast from China Lake and they think it's going to land at Nellis Bombing Range, but after it drops down under radar it's supposed to make a big loop around to the south and come down through the valleys at treetop level, hop the Chocolate Mountains, pass over the Salton Sea, and land somewhere near Superstition Mountain." I chewed my lip and wagged a finger to punctuate my remark. "And that's what bothers me."

"Why?"

"Because Husky, Dansforth, and Halsey have led me to believe the guidance system aboard the missile isn't worth a damn. That's what this flap is all about; to give them time to perfect it. But if that Tomahawk does what they say it's going to do, and lands where they say it's going to land, I'd say the system is pretty good. In which case, somebody is lying. See what I mean?"

"But why would they do that?"

"Damned if I know. That's what's been bothering me. I learned a long time ago that the first rule of a covert action is to get your enemy looking in the wrong direction, and I think we've been pointed in the wrong direction. The problem is I don't know why, and I don't know who or what I'm supposed to be looking for."

I leaned against the wall and pulled her over with me so she was nestled in the crook of my arm.

I stared at the ceiling for awhile, imagining that B-52 at thirty thousand feet, heading north from Edwards with the Tomahawk tucked under one wing. It would be a cold, clear day and the 52's contrail would make an easy target for the camera operators on the ground. The Range Controller would count down the time for the drop, give azimuth and elevation readings, and slant ranges to all the camera stations, and if all the sites got acquisition, a strobe light near the missile would ignite and the Tomahawk would be released. It would fall away, the airfoils would extend, and the onboard computer would start the Cascade Generator.

I could visualize the missile diving for the earth as silently as a falling feather, hugging the ground with chase planes in hot pursuit. What about the chase planes? They would certainly be armed to shoot down the missile if it strayed off course just as the Russians' planes had been armed to destroy their malfunctioning cruise missile.

While the Cascade powered Tomahawk might outrun the chase planes, it couldn't outrun the air-to-air missiles because somewhere just above Mach three it would disintegrate against the sheer wall of air it would be pushing at sea level.

The Cascade Generator produced no heat, no infrared emanations of its own, but the heated surface of the missile might be enough to guide the AAMs, or there might be some kind of laser reflecting device aboard to guide the rockets in for the kill in case of a malfunction.

I wondered how they had planned for that and the more I thought about it, the more it began to look like a wild goose chase. The whole thing began to smell bad.

"Got an idea, sweetheart," I said, sitting up and looking at Brandy. "If you'll start bringing out the rest of our stuff, I'll make a call to Dansforth and we can leave tonight." She eased out of the booth and we headed for the house.

"Why do you want to leave tonight?"

"Just to stay one step ahead of these birds," I said.

I looked at my watch and went to the phone. Dansforth had had time to get home and I had some questions to ask. He answered the phone on the second ring.

"Did I get you out of bed?"

"No, I just walked in. What's up?"

"Do you know what happened to the Cascade Generator you recovered from Husky!"

"Why do you want to know that?"

"Just tell me if you know where it went."

"As far as I know it was returned to Future Industries," he said after he thought about it. "Why do you want to know?"

"Whose responsibility was it to see that it got back there?"

"Halsey's, but why are you worried about it?"

"Because, Steve, something isn't right with this operation. I have a bad feeling about it. I can't put my finger on it, but something just doesn't jibe. Do yourself a favor and check to see if that C.G.7 got back to the lab, and I want you to be available when I call in from the checkpoints. I don't want to talk to anyone else."

"I'll have the information for you when you call in. What have you come up with?"

"Nothing yet, but when I get your answer tomorrow I might have an idea."

"Well, don't keep any secrets, and don't try to tackle this thing alone if anything goes sour, understand?"

"You'll be the first to know if we run into trouble and that's a promise."

"I'll hold you to that, Richard."

"Right. I'll call you tomorrow from the first checkpoint. Good night."

I hung up the phone just as Brandy was coming out of the bedroom with the first load of gear. I helped her put it away and went in for the rest.

"Was that Dansforth?" she asked. I told her it was and she wanted to know if I'd told him we were leaving tonight and I shook my head.

"Why not?" She stopped and stared at me curiously.

"Because I think this is a set up, that's why not. Maybe I'm howling at the moon, but if I'm right about my feelings I'll want a few days head start on them. I'll drive at night while you sleep and you'll have to drive during the day. It'll be tough but I want to get there a few days early so I can check on some things, make some calls, and look over the area."

"What will he say about that?"

"What he doesn't know won't hurt him. We'll make him think we are farther back, that's all. If he finds out and gets hot, it'll be too late. What can he do if we're already there?"

"Nothing, I guess." She pointed to the carbine. "That's the last of it."

"Got it." I followed her out and placed the carbine in the gun rack.

"I'm going to leave a note for the neighbors to keep an eye on the place," I said, "then I'll be back to help you put this stuff away."

I made sure everything was off, turned out the lights and locked the door, then climbed up into the motor home. In fifteen minutes everything was stowed and we were strapped in and warming up the engine. I reached over and touched her hand.

"Well, darlin', here we go." It was ten minutes until nine.

I drove to Gainesville, took 441 to Interstate 75, and by midnight I was driving west on Interstate 10. Brandy didn't care to travel at night because she couldn't enjoy the sights, and pretty soon she was yawning and nodding her head. I looked at her and she gave me a sleepy smile.

"You had better crawl up there and get some sleep," I told her. "You're going to have to drive many hours tomorrow."

"Will you be okay?"

"If I get tired, I'll pull over; don't worry."

"I wanted to stay awake and talk but I'm so sleepy."

"Go to bed. I'll see you in the morning."

She wobbled back and climbed into the bed and that was the last I saw of her until sunrise.

ELEVEN

The highway was dots and dashes, the traffic was headlights coming and taillights going, and the sounds were the engine, the air at the windows, and the soft shush of the heater filling the motor home with warm air. The night was crisp and cold, and the clear sky was filled with electric blue stars as the motor home cruised along the Interstate between Saw Palmettos, Slash Pine, and Live Oaks. I watched the rear view mirror for the first hundred miles, then decided I might as well relax and enjoy the trip. The miles rolled beneath the coach while I thought of the days ahead.

I was convinced that if a cruise missile, powered by a Cascade Generator, was going to be launched at China Lake on the fifteenth, the pilots of the chase planes weren't going to let it simply get away. They could track it with onboard radar all the way to touchdown and even if they didn't shoot it down somewhere along the route, they would know exactly where it was long before I would, and I'd never get close to it. So I had to believe that no such test would occur. In which case, what was the purpose of our trip to California?

The agency seemed convinced the test would occur as scheduled and I could only assume they had checked that out thoroughly, although it would be easy enough for the perpetrators of a

hoax to fabricate and authenticate such a story. I wondered if anyone had actually seen the Tomahawk or confirmed the launch with China Lake.

I knew from experience such a test might be on the schedule but it could also be cancelled at the last minute by any number of people, for any one of countless reasons. So everyone concerned might think the test was going as planned, even get set up with all the support vehicles standing by, chase planes ready, and cameras loaded and pointing toward the sky until the last possible moment before the mission would be scrubbed.

A drop aircraft might actually load the Tomahawk and fly it all the way to China Lake but never drop it. A missile might actually be dropped, but it wouldn't be one powered by a Cascade Generator, nor would it be allowed to sail off into the sunset while everyone looked the other way.

How, then, was anyone going to make it appear as if the missile had strayed off course and landed in the desert conveniently close enough for me to stroll over and pinch the avionics before anyone showed up? Did Halsey and Dansforth forget I'd been in Research and Development while I was in the Navy and knew how those outfits operated? Having been a Range Controller, and having acted as liaison between military and civilian engineers, I knew test drops and launches must occur within a narrow framework of finite parameters.

The success of a test was limited by wind velocity and direction, cloud cover, light conditions, film speed and resolution, recovery crews and their vehicles, pilots and their planes, radar, radio communications, stray civilian aircraft, mechanical condition of the camera mounts and the awareness of their operators, film processors, the engineering design of the airframe and avionics of the test vehicle, and dozens of other factors. If any one or a combination of any of these and other conditions fell outside the established parameters, the test could, and probably would, be scrubbed.

American engineers have a penchant for backup systems in case anything goes wrong with the primary guidance or recovery system. Not only do they hate losing their projects, they absolutely abhor the idea that something they endorsed might fall out of the sky onto someone's home or business, so they take very great pains to insure neither of those events occur. Even the manned Space Shuttle flights are launched with a PDX package aboard if a malfunction requires its destruction in the case it might head for a populated area.

That's why I knew no one in his right mind was going to let an unmanned, top secret project go sailing off into the wild blue without a trace. They would want that Tomahawk on the ground, even if it was in little pieces.

But that brought up another question: if the test was not going to occur as the agency had been told, who had fabricated the hoax, and what was I going to find out in the desert when I got there

with my direction finder?

Anyone with enough time and money—and the agency qualified in both instances—could construct a mock-up of a cruise missile, and put it in a remote section of the California desert. With a little bit of movie set cosmetics they could even make it appear as if it had actually crashed there, but why would they want to do that? If someone wanted to steal the Cascade Generator, there had to be an easier way, a way that didn't involve all the logistics problems and risk.

Everything would have to be scheduled step-by-step down to the last minute for such a plan to work. The only way the perpetrators could plan it that accurately would be to convince everyone down the line the test launch was going to occur as scheduled, so the plan had to come from someone who had the clout to request and organize a bogus test. Who was that?

Dansforth said Halsey had planned the operation, but I doubted that he planned the test. Instead, I believed someone at Future Industries had suggested the test or had convinced Halsey such a test would take place and then he seized the opportunity to devise his scheme to catch the spies. All the information and hardware had come from Future Industries, including the explosive devices rigged to look like a Cascade Generator and its peripheral components, and Halsey probably hadn't questioned their authenticity. Would he open the cylinder to see if it would explode? Neither Halsey, Dansforth, nor I had doubted that what we had been given was anything less than what we had been told. But what if it wasn't an explosive device at all?

What if it was the real Cascade Generator? What if, instead of taking out the Cascade Generator and replacing it with a booby trap, I was going to give them the real generator and take an explosive device out of an elaborate mock-up, then hand that device to the American engineers at Future Industries to dissect and examine? It was the only thing I could think of at the moment to explain why such an elaborate scheme had been devised.

Maybe, instead of eliminating their research team, they were going to eliminate ours.

I pulled in at a gas station east of Mobile Bay to fill the tanks and Brandy woke up. She slid out of bed and squinted at me with sleepy eyes.

"Where are we?" she asked dreamily.

"Mobile Bay, Alabama."

"What time is it?"

"A little after seven. I'm going to fill up with gas then drive on to Biloxi, Mississippi. You have time to freshen up if you want."

I pointed to the ladies' room at the side of the building. She found her shoes and jacket and stepped out into the cold, rubbing her arms.

I went to the closet and looked at the box containing the avionics. After I had rested I was going to take a closer look at all the components. If I was correct, I had the real Cascade Generator right there in front of me, and someone was

going to have to explain that.

Brandy came back to put on a new face while I was waiting for the credit card, and she was getting in the passenger seat when I climbed aboard. I gave her a kiss and fired up the rig. She wanted to drive but I told her I wanted to get out of the heavy traffic, and she could take over later.

"You look so tired," she said sympathetically.

"I'm only going to drive another hour, then you'll have it for the rest of the day."

I pulled out into traffic and pushed the bus up to speed.

"We'll have some breakfast and I'll get myself squared away when we stop in an hour or so."

She turned on the radio and got a weather report, then switched it off; we were going to have rain again before the day was over. She got up and disappeared in the back, and pretty soon I could smell coffee brewing. Ten minutes later she came back with two steaming mugs.

"Did you figure out anything about this deal?" she asked as she buckled in.

"I think so, but I am going to have to take inventory of some of this junk before I can be sure."

I told her what I thought and why I was certain it was a hoax, adding that I'd have to talk to Dansforth and make some calls to China Lake before deciding what to do.

"Why would they go to so much trouble to steal the engine?" she asked. "If they had it last week, why didn't they just keep it?"

"Because everyone knew they had it and, besides, getting the engine and computer is only part of the plan. The other part may be disrupting our program by killing the engineers at Future Industries."

"Roger, too?"

"If he's in the room when they open the cylinder."

"How can we stop that from happening?"

"Well, if I'm right about this, and I don't know yet that I am, I have a plan, but it will depend on what we find when we get there whether it will work or not. Let's say someone takes a mock-up of a Tomahawk out to the desert and goes to all the trouble to make it look as if it had crashed there. Inside is a homing device set to emit a signal at a certain time so it can be located. Also inside is an explosive device that looks like a Cascade Generator and its flight recorder and computer.

"Nobody is looking for this thing, because nobody lost it. We're supposed to show up with the real components and make the switch, thinking we're taking the real ones and leaving a booby trap. What would you do if you were them?"

"I'd wait somewhere until the switch was made and then go get the real one."

"And who would be looking for you?"

"Nobody."

"Right. You'd have all the time in the world to get the thing out of the country because, until the phony blows up at

F.I.A., nobody knows the real one has been stolen."

"But who could do that and get away with it?"

"Someone very high up at Future Industries."

"Could it be done without Roger's knowledge?"

"Oh, I'm sure it could. Who but the spies would know about it? They could have a Tomahawk sitting in a warehouse for months just waiting for this moment. It isn't like they're stealing it, see?"

"But wouldn't someone wonder where the real Cascade Generator was?"

"Probably, but we don't know if the one Husky had ever got back to the plant, and even if it did, anyone could say it had been locked up for security reasons and no one would even question it. Meanwhile it gets sent back to the agency disguised as a bomb."

"The agency gives it to us, we give it to the people who want to get their hands on it, and they walk away without a scratch."

"Bingo."

"Pretty clever." She sipped her coffee and watched the scenery slip past her window. After a few minutes she turned back to me. "So if all this is true and you're right, what can we do to prevent them from getting the real one?"

"Remember when I said the first rule of a covert action was to get your opponent looking in the wrong direction? Well that's what we're going to do. We're going to create an illusion so they think we make the switch when in reality we put back the same components we take out."

"But won't they be watching?"

"I certainly hope so. That way they won't be so eager to examine them to verify their authenticity. Maybe we can rig a shield so they really can't see what we're doing."

"What if the thing explodes while you're taking it out?"

"It won't be that sensitive. They wouldn't risk damaging the real components and, besides, they would want it to explode after it gets back to Future Industries. They wouldn't want to alert anyone or do anything that would hamper their departure from the country."

"Of course all this is academic if we find we have a bomb in the closet?"

"Yeah. In that case we do what we have been sent to do and get out as fast as we can. I don't think that's going to be the case."

She watched the scenery again for awhile, lost in thought, sipping her coffee until it was gone.

"You're going to open it up to see if it's real, aren't you?" she asked without looking at me.

"After I've rested and talked to Dansforth." I patted her hand. "Don't worry, love, I have the diagrams back there in the folder. I won't touch it if it looks like it can't be opened. Don't worry."

We drove on in silence for nearly an hour. I pulled off the highway north of Biloxi at exit forty-six and headed north toward Cedar Lake. When we got to a sparsely inhabited area I stopped under

some trees, got out of the seat, and went back to the bathroom. Brandy fixed breakfast while I bathed and shaved. When I came out fifteen minutes later, fresh and dressed in clean clothes, I felt as if I could drive another three hundred miles. We sat down to a breakfast of ham and eggs, fried potatoes, toast, jelly, juice, and coffee, and I ate like a starving wolf.

After we were finished, Brandy took her turn in the bathroom while I got into the folder and read the orders. They told me nothing so I studied the diagram for the bomb and found out it was harmless as long as the priming screw wasn't tightened down. Tightening the screw was supposed to cut a thin wire, but the screw then completed the circuit until it was removed from the cylinder cap. Removing it would cause the bomb to explode.

I opened the closet and removed the box, then placed the metal cylinder on the table. I loosened the screw and examined the hole with a lighted magnifying glass. No wire.

"What are you doing out there?" Brandy asked from behind the door.

"I'm checking something out."

"If you blow us up I'll never speak to you again." She opened the door and looked at the cylinder.

"I knew it, I just knew it."

I smiled at her and squinted one eye. "If you keep standing there like that, I'll put this away and you'll have to take another shower."

She stuck her tongue out at me, gave me a coy shrug, and went back behind the door.

I removed four hex screws from the cap and eased it up with the edge of a knife. Nothing happened. I examined the screw holes again. Still no wires. I pried off the cap and gently raised it until I could see all the way around the inside of the cylinder.

I had never seen anything quite like it, but knew it wasn't a bomb. The insides were attached to the cap and the cylinder was a protective sleeve, but since I didn't know what would happen if I exposed it, I slid it back together and replaced the screws.

The computer was about the same size and weight as an automobile radio. I eased out the priming screw and looked for a wire but couldn't find it, so I took the side off. It was obviously nothing more than a computer of some sort and, after examining it carefully, I reassembled it and set it aside.

The recorder was about the size of a small briefcase and since my examination revealed no wire, I removed the back. I expected to find a maze of wires and electronics cards at best, or plastic explosives at worst. Instead, I found the complete technical manuals for the Cascade Generator, its computer, and flight recorder.

Brandy came out of the bathroom looking like a million bucks just as I was folding my arms across my chest and leaning back to think about what I had in front of me. She stood there quietly watching me and I knew I didn't even have to tell her what I'd discovered. She sat beside me and stared at the compo-

nents with a mixture of fear and awe.

"What do you think they're worth?" she asked softly.

"All the money and every human life on earth, I'm afraid." I couldn't take my eyes from them. Right there, two feet in front of me, was the power source humankind had longed for and dreamed of for centuries. Wisely used the Cascade Generator could help create an incredibly perfect world, could send millions across the void of heaven to colonize the cosmos, could change the entire course of history by uniting all the peoples of the earth for that great adventure. Here was the most wondrous, and at the same time the most terrible, machine ever created by the mind of man. Unscrupulous men, hungry for power, would lie, cheat, steal, or kill millions to get their hands on it. It was right there in front of me; I could reach out and touch it. It was the ring of power unending. He who possessed it controlled the world.

It would have been useless to destroy it because at least one other already existed, and even if none did, it wouldn't take long before it could be recreated by the same scientists or others. I could destroy the instrument but I couldn't destroy the knowledge and technology that had made it manifest. Brandy took my hand and held it tightly.

"What are you going to do with it, Richard?" she asked.

"The only thing I can do: make certain it gets back into the hands of those who built it and hope they have the common sense to use it wisely."

Thirty minutes later Brandy was piloting the motor home down the Interstate while I sat in the passenger seat drinking coffee and reading the manuals for the generator and its attendant components. Most of it was complicated math and technical research data, but I got enough out of it to understand how it was supposed to work. I discovered, despite its unique and sophisticated electronics, it was really quite a simple device, based on well-known principles.

Although the core appeared to be solid, it was really a series of paper thin disks imprinted with thousands of microscopic energy cells. The energy imparted to the first disk by the computer was captured by the cells of the second disk and multiplied times itself, then that energy was captured by the third disk and multiplied again, and so on until, by the time the cascading energy was delivered to a seminator, it could be measured in millions of units of thrust.

A tiny amount of energy was constantly siphoned off to recharge the first disk and to power the computer and flight recorder. The computer monitored the energy output at the seminator and increased or decreased the final thrust by regulating the amount of energy imparted to the cells of the first disk so the actual thrust could be measured in amounts ranging from a few grams to several hundreds of thousands, even millions, of units of thrust.

It was a perpetual motion machine with a vengeance, and the editorial comment indicated that the generator could produce this cascading energy

eternally since it was non-consuming. A generator like the one in the closet behind us was capable of producing six million pounds of thrust so it could push a pretty good size hunk of iron through the sky, and could do it without the noise, pollutants, or brute force of a turbine or rocket engine.

I closed the manual and shook my head in amazement, then took a big breath and let my mind wander to that supersecret satellite out there being powered by a Cascade Generator.

"They sure named it right," I murmured aloud.

"What's that?" Brandy asked.

"The Morningstar. The satellite they just put into orbit. They named it right."

"Why?"

"Did you ever see in the movies that weapon the gladiators used with a big spiked ball on the end of a chain?"

"Yeah."

"Well, that was called a Morningstar."

She thought about that for awhile. "Surely they didn't call it Morningstar for that reason."

"Probably not, but it's a perfect description of what it is: a club hanging over our heads." I yawned and rubbed my eyes.

"I'm going to sleep for awhile. If you get tired or if we run into rain just pull into a rest stop and take a break. But don't let me sleep past four o'clock, okay?"

She agreed and I gave her a kiss, then made my way back to the bed, kicked off my shoes, and crawled in. I don't even remember pulling the covers over me. If I dreamed I don't recall any of it because I slept soundly until Brandy shook me awake at four p.m.

"It's four o'clock and we're in Sam Houston Jones State Park north of Lake Charles, Louisiana," she said. "I've got coffee made, and I'm fixing something to eat."

"I need an aspirin," I mumbled.

She found them while I washed my face and tried to bring myself back to life. After I took the aspirin I sat down and had a cup of coffee while I studied a map of Louisiana.

"Hey," I said, "we made good time. Have any problems?"

"No. This thing drives like a dream. I wish we could keep it." She placed a plate of food in front of me and sat down.

"There is one thing...."

"What?"

"I don't know if I'm getting paranoid or what, but I think someone is following us." She pointed to a sedan parked about fifty feet away.

"I noticed it soon after you went to sleep but I didn't pay much attention until I pulled in here."

"Well, we'll see what they do when I drive out after awhile." I got the binoculars and read the license plates. Maryland.

"I'll have Dansforth check on this plate and see if it's anyone official. If they give us any problems, I'll slow them down a little."

I reached for the phone, dialed the

mobile operator, and had Dansforth on the line half a minute later. I gave him the license number and he promised to have it checked immediately.

"Now," he said with a sigh, "about that generator. I checked with Future Industries and the project Director says he received it and that it's now locked in their vault."

"Okay, Steve. See if you can go to San Diego to take a look at it without arousing any suspicions. Don't let them know you're coming and don't tell anyone you're going. Can you do that?"

"I could, but why?"

"Because I don't think they have it, that's why. I don't know how many they've built, but I've got one of them right here." There was a long pause, then Dansforth muted the telephone and I could hear him talking to someone else.

"Are you there?" I asked.

"Yeah, I'm here. What did you. . .what makes you think you have a Cascade Generator?"

"I took it apart and looked at it. This isn't a bomb; I've got a Mark Seven Cascade Generator, a computer, and a boxful of technical manuals. I just spent a few hours reading all about it."

"Damn, damn . . . ."

"Yeah. You had better find out whose idea this was and keep an eye on him because if I put this in the missile...."

"Never mind; I've already got the picture. Where are you? Do you want me to come out there to get it!"

"It's safe, and I need you somewhere where you can get your hands on the information I'm going to need. I don't trust anyone else. Until you find out who concocted this little gimmick, you'd better keep it a secret. I've got some people I can call when I get to California to find out if they are going to have a test at China Lake, but I'll bet they're not."

I told him some of the reasons why I'd come to that conclusion and he agreed it was unlikely, especially since I seemed to have the real generator.

"Who provided the components?" I asked. "And who told you they were bombs?"

"They were provided by Future Industries, of course, and they were the ones who rigged the pyros, or so they said."

"How did you get them?"

"Halsey hand carried them back to the agency."

"Do you trust Halsey?"

"Oh, yeah, Richard. I've worked with him for years and he's as straight as they come. He's hardheaded, but he isn't a traitor."

"Okay, I'll buy that, but either Future Industries gave you a bogus package or it was switched somewhere between there and the agency. I'll put money on someone at F.I.A. as the culprit, but you are going to have to use the agency's resources to run him down.

"I can take care of anyone who shows up out in the desert, but you are going to have to catch the others. Somebody should make a move when they realize the field op isn't going to show up with the goods. Someone is going to have to be there to nab him."

"We'll keep everyone under surveillance until the operation is complete. What's your plan?"

I told him what I was going to do during the switch and he agreed it would probably work.

"But don't assume they won't try to get the generator sometime before the switch," he said. "If they get any hint that the operation has gone sour, they'll ice you and be gone before we know what's happened."

"I'm aware of that. While you're checking on things, why don't you use your authority to find out if China Lake has a test scheduled. And try Edwards, Fallon, Nevada, and any other base out there that might be involved. Indian Springs, Nellis, Tonapah; anybody."

"Okay, I can have that information for you tonight. Why don't you call me back in an hour? Here is the make on that license plate. The car is a rental. The driver is D.H. Calhoun. He's head of security for a big electronics firm in Silicon Valley, California. Select 'Receive File' from your computer, hang up the phone, and I'll send you his stats.

"I'm going to be busy running down the information you asked for, so if I'm not here when you call back, type MORNINGSTAR when the computer asks you for a codename, and you can have everything I've got up to that time. Got it?"

"You mean I can get into your computer with this thing?"

"Yes, but don't abuse the privilege or I'll take it away from you. Read the instruction book with the program and it'll tell you how to proceed."

He explained again how to extract the information on Calhoun, and a few seconds later I had his whole life on the monitor while hardcopy rolled off the printer beside the computer. Neat.

Brandy watched me search for the proper keys for awhile and hustled me away from the desk.

"This is nearly the same computer I've been using at the Police Department for the last five years." She glanced at the booklet, thumbing through it quickly.

"Yup. I've got this thing wired. Now, what do you want to know?"

"What can you give me?"

"The life history of a million or so people, every significant event that occurred in modern history from the Revolution to the last Shuttle launch, complete with photographs, drawings, diagrams, and maps. Everything from agents to zealots, my love."

I stared at the screen. "From Aalborg, Denmark to Zyzyn, Poland, too, I betcha."

"No doubt."

"Let's concentrate for the moment on Mister Calhoun and try to figure out why he happens to be parked fifty feet down the road at this most opportune time."

Dansforth was correct when he told me I'd appreciate having this little marvel if we got into a shoving contest. Calhoun turned out to be a retired short colonel who had been with I-Corps in Vietnam, but who was now employed as Security Department Head for the elec-

tronics firm in California. I read the rest of the report but that was all I needed to know to convince me Calhoun was after the generator for reasons of his own.

"Do you think this thing will work while we're driving down the road?" I asked Brandy.

"It will as long as we're within the range of this transmitting relay station. Why?"

"Calhoun is alone and he has to sleep sometime. If we keep going, changing off, we can soon leave him behind. I want you to stay on the computer as long as you can and find out if there is any link between him and anyone at Future Industries. In about half an hour I'd like for you to call Dansforth to find out if he got any information on that missile launch."

I gave her a kiss and went forward to put things away, then dropped into the driver's seat, fired up the engine, and pulled out.

Calhoun stared at us balefully over the bottom edge of his window, and in a few minutes I could see his car in the mirror. We had a full tank of fuel and could drive for ten more hours, and I was certain he'd have to give up before that.

Brandy came up and joined me in about fifteen minutes. She was carrying a stack of computer paper.

"I didn't get everything I wanted because I lost the signal, but I can get the rest when we stop. There's nothing here to connect Calhoun with any of the engineers at Future Industries. What do you think?"

"I don't know. I've been sitting here frying to figure out how and why he is involved at all. A lot of information gets passed around among all the different competing research companies and maybe he just happened to hear about the Mark Seven and decided to investigate on his company's behalf. Maybe he's on vacation and isn't following us at all. What did Dansforth say?"

"No launch," she replied.

"Did he check all the bases?"

"Every one. No test. Nothing."

"Well, that pretty well tells us what we have to do, doesn't it?"

"1 reckon so," she said, looking grim.

I settled down to some steady driving with an eye on the rear and saw Calhoun's car pull into a rest stop just before we got to Houston. We never saw him again during the trip, but I had no doubts that he had called ahead to alert everyone he knew in California that we were on our way, and well ahead of the schedule they'd set. I expected to have lots of company waiting for us when we got there.

TWELVE

I filled the fuel tanks in San Antonio and again at Fort Stockton, then drove to a rest area about twenty miles east for a break.

Brandy woke and joined me for coffee after she washed up. She parted the curtains and looked out at the rain, then looked back at me with a sly smile.

"Rain," she said softly. "I love to sleep when it rains. We're stopped for

the night, right? I don't have to drive so I'll go back to bed with you."

"We're stopped for the day. It's morning already, although you wouldn't know it by looking outside. I've never seen the sky so dark; it looks cataclysmic."

"Where are we?"

"Twenty miles west of Fort Stockton, Texas."

"We're still in Texas?"

"Yup. We'll still be in Texas most of tomorrow, too. Crossing Texas is like going to the moon and takes about the same amount of time."

"How much farther do we have to go to get to California?"

"About nine hundred and fifty, give or take a few miles."

"How long will it take to get there?"

"If the rain doesn't keep us grounded we could make it in twenty-four hours of steady, easy driving."

"Shall I finish the computer search?" she asked after she finished her coffee.

"If you want. I'm going to take a bath and have some more coffee; maybe get something to eat later." I headed for the bathroom and soon I could hear the computer making noises as it retrieved information. I scrubbed myself clean and shaved, and by the time I had finished brushing my teeth, Brandy was sitting back at the table with a pile of hardcopy and a fresh cup of coffee. I wrapped a towel around me and sat down with her.

"Love your outfit," she said with a smile.

"Thanks. My folks gave it to me on my birthday. It's always been my favorite. What have we here?"

"Well, I couldn't find any connection between Calhoun and the engineers, so I ran a check on other personnel at Future Industries and came up with Judson Templeton, their head of security. Seems he and Calhoun were in Vietnam together with I-Corps. I thought that was significant so I ran a check of all I-Corps personnel and guess who else popped up?"

"Tell me."

"David Husky!"

I looked at my watch. It should be after nine a.m. on the east coast. I grabbed the phone and had the operator put me through to Dansforth. When he answered I told him about the connection between Calhoun and Templeton, and he mulled that over for awhile.

"Good thing you told me that," he said laconically. "I would have had to get Templeton's permission to get into the vault to check on the generator. How did you get that information anyhow?"

"Brandy knows how to use the computer. It's a handy little gadget."

"Did she tell you there is no test scheduled for the cruise missile?"

"Yes. Do you think this could be a case of industrial espionage rather than international cloak and dagger?"

"Possibly, but if Calhoun really does know about the project, a lot of others may also know about it. You may have all kinds of antagonists out there. I'm going to go ahead and catch my flight

in about an hour so I can monitor Templeton while you two are out in the desert. Where are you now?"

"Just west of Fort Stockton, Texas."

"How did you manage that? How long have you been driving?"

"Night and day since you left the house. I want to have a look around and find out what's going on before I walk out into that desert."

"Okay. I'll be at the San Diego station sometime this evening so call me there from now on."

He gave me the number and I hung up the phone, then went back and sat down. Brandy had a fresh cup of coffee for me.

"What did he say?" she asked.

"I don't think he's convinced Calhoun and Templeton rigged this trick and, I don't know, he may be right. But somebody at Future Industries is in on it or the agency wouldn't have picked up the real generator from them. That wasn't an accident; that was planned. I'll bet you Templeton is the only person at Future Industries who really knows we have the real Cascade Generator, and it's no mere coincidence that Calhoun, who served with Templeton in Vietnam, is trying to follow us."

I thought about a motive for awhile. Two men who know each other, who served in the same outfit, but who work for different organizations as heads of their respective security departments. They had many things in common: they both had jobs in sensitive areas, and both were in a position to steal the engine. But why? They couldn't keep it. It was useless unless one considered it nothing more than a commodity to be sold or traded.

Dansforth seemed oddly unconcerned about Calhoun and only mildly interested in Judson Templeton. Surely he could have extracted the same information from the mainframe computer back there in Washington, but either he hadn't bothered, or he had and found it insignificant. I shook my head.

"It doesn't make any sense, honey," I said. "They can't mass produce the engine, so the only thing they could do would be to try to sell it to the highest bidder. But where would they hide after that? All the money in the world couldn't keep them from getting caught."

"Maybe they plan on starting their own manufacturing firm to market it."

"It would cost millions, maybe billions, to build a business like that. The secret is not to build it. In any event, I doubt if either of them has that much money."

"Oh, I don't know about that. They may not make that kind of money in their present jobs, but Templeton may have that much money laying around somewhere."

"Why do you say that?"

She slid a pile of papers over to me and tapped a section she had circled in red.

"The computer report. Templeton was court-martialed as a suspect for trying to smuggle several hundred million dollars from Vietnam to the U.S. just before the fall of Saigon. The charges were

eventually dropped because they never found the money, but it left a scar on his record. He was passed over for promotion and he resigned, then immediately went to work for Future Industries. Now guess where his best recommendations came from."

"Calhoun?"

"And Husky. He couldn't get much better than that, under the circumstances."

Hundreds of millions of dollars. Templeton could have got his hands on that much and more if he had been in the right place at the right time. China had printed billions of dollars worth of counterfeit American money and funneled it down the Ho Chi Minh Trail and overland from Cambodia. We had found caches of it during our long range patrol, and had burned some of it, probably millions of dollars worth, whenever we felt we could without being detected. That information had been included in the reports I'd carried back to Cam Ranh Bay. Millions more that we hadn't even found must have been buried along the hundreds of miles of the trail from the DMZ to the Mekong Delta, and I imagined most of it was still there.

"Damn," I muttered. "Hundreds of millions of dollars."

"Suppose they've hidden it all this time just waiting for an opportunity to use it. What better time than now?"

"No kidding. You know, honey, that money was absolutely perfect. Printed by the Chinese and consecutively numbered. They had planned to demoralize our currency by flooding the world with bogus money. I'm not certain they didn't succeed, either. Look what happened to the buck after Vietnam. I wonder if that had anything to do with it?"

"How could Templeton have got his hands on that much money? How could he have smuggled it out of the country without getting caught?"

"Vietnam was an insane place during the fall of Saigon, Brandy. Nobody knew what anyone else was doing. There are a number of ways he could have got his hands on that money. He might have been in a position to demand that any confiscated or discovered money be brought to him, or he may simply have stumbled upon it somewhere, packed it up, and took it with him. It may not be the counterfeit money at all. Just prior to the fall of the Saigon, swarms of North Vietnamese Regulars were attacking areas of the South unopposed, but there was ample time for anyone who was so inclined to devise a scheme to steal real American money.

"The United States was pouring millions of dollars a day into South Vietnam. There were five hundred thousand troops in the country when I was there from 1965 to 1968. Say their average wage was eight hundred dollars a month. Eight hundred dollars times half a million troops is a lot of money to have laying around come payday.

"When it became apparent that no one was going to stop the NVA, the hotshots all ran out to jump on the first planes leaving the country, but they had assigned small groups of men to destroy the billions of dollars that had to be left

behind. It was called Sanction and Relieve."

Sanction and Relieve. I shook my head in disgust.

"One hundred million dollars doesn't take up much space. If it was in big bills-and the one hundred dollar bill was as common over there as the one dollar bill is over here—it would fit into a couple of large packing crates. There was no one who would stop a high ranking officer to check his shipments during the evacuation. Hell, the customs officers were the first ones on the planes.

"People brought out gold, art treasures, gems, money, weapons, anything they thought they could get away with, including drugs. People were too interested in throwing their babies into the cargo bays of moving aircraft and trying to dodge a fusillade of automatic weapons fire to worry about what anyone had in their suitcase."

"But if he had that much money, why would he want to risk exposure by trying to steal a top secret project?"

"I don't know. For one thing, money is just a pile of paper if you can't spend it, no matter how good it is. He couldn't spend any of it, good or bad, because somebody might be watching him. You can believe if the government tried to prosecute him because they believed he took the money, they didn't quit looking just because he's now a civilian. The only way that money would be worth anything is if he could use a project of some sort to turn it into something else."

"The Cascade Generator."

"Yeah. Dansforth told me someone covertly funneled billions of dollars into the project when it was first conceived. Now we know where it came from."

"Isn't that illegal?"

"Of course, but who's going to prosecute the man who financed the most incredible discovery of the century? The job got done, and if anyone in government knows how it was financed, they'll all look the other way. Besides, anyone who could blow the whistle on him is probably guilty of the same or worse, and wouldn't risk getting caught for their own illegal activities just to make Templeton look bad.

"If you knew what all these secret agencies were doing with your tax money, you'd fall down and cry. They finance clandestine armies, support terrorists, even dump money into the treasuries of governments who are supposed to be our enemies and then get on TV and raise hell because the people they just financed are taking Americans hostage and blowing up our commercial airliners.

"It's a matter of economics, Brandy; all that chicanery keeps the millwheels turning, and keeps people employed. Think how many people would be out of a job if there were no drug dealers, no terrorists, no arms dealers, no thieves or burglars. Hell, we subsidize all those people just to keep our law enforcement agents employed. If all the bad guys were behind bars, we'd have a quarter of a million officers and agents on the street looking for work, then they'd become the bad guys, draining

the welfare and unemployment insurance coffers."

I got out of the towel, wandered back to fall in bed, and Brandy joined me ten minutes later. I tossed and rolled fitfully, trying to put the pieces of the puzzle into some kind of logical order, but the picture failed to materialize.

We're dinosaurs, I thought, living between a past whose inhabitants had used stone tools and uttered guttural moans to convey their messages, and a future generation determined to reach the stars, whose purposes and circumstances has devised terms like biofeedback, ionizing radiation, ecosystem, bioprogram, and artificially induced DNA structuring, or AIDS.

We're the flotsam and jetsam left in the wake of a tidal wave building for an assault on the shore of some alien world. Behind us is the terrible expanse of wide ocean representing our past, and ahead is the fearsome rising wave which is our future. The wave advances, refusing to carry us along, leaving us behind in the hollow trough. The past beckons, but we know we cannot return for the way is wide and the memory of the far shore has been dimmed by time.

But we live in the same world peopled by beings whose speech has not even provided for the concept of hatred or war, who do not understand the meaning of personal property, who have no terms for objects called weapons. They haunt the jungles of South America and Africa, stroll insouciantly across the Australian outback, or pole their longboats up the misty rivers of Asia.

In a world where people have forgotten how to read, where people stare at electronic information measured in bits and pixels and scan lines, we have become the dinosaurs, living in the scant few moments allotted to us before we become extinct, before we devise the weapons and political philosophy that will eliminate us as a species, and make our planet uninhabitable for a million million years.

No amount of wishing or praying or hoping was going to change that. Our destiny is among the stars and, like bursting seed pods seeking fertile soil in which to grow, future generations will leap away from this tiny island and seek their paradise elsewhere while the campfires of the wandering tribes still burn on the hillsides under the dying trees.

We are the dinosaurs whose future is extinction. We are the flotsam and jetsam, having neither past nor future, caught in an equation of zeros to the hundredth power.

When we woke hours later, the rain had stopped, and after we had dressed and stowed all the loose gear, I fired up the engine and we took turns driving all the way across New Mexico and Arizona to Winterhaven, California where I stopped, again, to fill the tanks. We got back on the Interstate, passed through the Agricultural Inspection station, and it was a straight one hour run from there to El Centro.

I turned north on Imperial Avenue and drove to the airport in Imperial

where I rented an Aeronca Champ. While I filed a flight plan, Brandy got the Nikon with a 400 millimeter lens and two rolls of Starburst black and white film. She stowed it on the luggage shelf while I did the preflight check, then we buckled in, cranked the engine and taxied out. I checked in with the tower while I zigzagged down to the south end of the runway, and got the local weather and altimeter setting. I turned into the seven mile an hour crosswind, pulled back on the stick to hold the tail down, put my heels hard on the brakes and ran up the engine to check the mags. After checking the controls and tapping the gauges, I got clearance from the tower, rolled out onto the runway, and powered up. One hundred and ten yards later the little plane was climbing smoothly into the clear, blue sky.

I climbed to one thousand feet, banked gently to the west and headed for the area north of Superstition Mountain while Brandy loaded the camera and set the f-stop and shutter speed. I kept the Salton Sea under the starboard wing until we cleared the northern boundary of the military test site, then made a left turn south towards the area where the missile was supposed to land. I had studied the large scale maps and knew within a few hundred yards where it was supposed to be. It didn't take long to find it.

Brandy tapped me on the shoulder and pointed to a broad, flat area below. We could see two men near the base of a sand dome assembling a mock-up, and she began taking pictures.

I looked for support vehicles, but other than a bobtailed truck, I didn't see any. The two men were working under a camouflaged netting but we could see what they were working on because we were looking for it. Brandy got half a dozen good shots and I flew due south to Interstate Eight, then turned the plane east and headed back to the airport.

An hour later we were at the One Hour Photo in El Centro waiting for our film to be processed and printed. It was 1:30 in the afternoon, February eighth.

Brandy made a fresh pot of coffee while I studied the maps again. The entire area was rough and crisscrossed with dry washes, but it was accessible to motorcycles, dune buggies, and four wheel drive vehicles. There were three ways in. One was from the north where San Felipe Wash crossed Highway Eighty-six, one was east of the test range off of Huff Road, but it crossed the area patrolled by security guards, and the third access was from the south where the railroad at Plaster City crossed old State Road 80. I'd been all over the area and, even though it was farther, I decided the road in from Plaster City would be the best to take.

Brandy got the coffee perking and came over to sit with me.

"What do you think?" she asked.

"About their little scheme or a way in?"

"Both. Where is it on the map?"

I pointed to a small circle I had pencilled on the map.

"That circle covers a fairly large area, but it's difficult to tell from this map just where we saw those guys. Every

time a Santa Ana blows, the sand dunes move and the wadis change course, so the terrain we see on this map isn't necessarily there anymore."

"What're wadis?"

"Dry washes. Here," I pointed to San Felipe Wash. "Like this one. It's what the dutch call a meander. When it rains, the water just follows the new contours created by the moving sand dunes."

"Following the lines of least resistance?" she asked.

"Right." I thought about a quote I'd seen on the wall of a men's room somewhere:

"Following the lines of least resistance is what makes some men and all rivers crooked".

"What were those round domes out there?" she asked. "They look manmade."

"They're naturally formed. Sand domes. Sand hills. Sand dunes. Quartz, silicone, garnet, dolomite, and fossil shells. This whole area used to be the bottom of a great sea that extended clear up into Utah. The Spanish explorers used to sail their galleons up here from Baja California in the old days."

"Umm," she mused briefly. "So how are we going to get to the missile?"

"We'll take this road north from Plaster City and follow the railroad until we're north of the mountain." I showed her the junction on the map. "It's hardpack out there for the most part, although there are some soft places and sinkholes. I've been over most of the area in an Army six-by, so I'm pretty sure we can make it most of the way without getting bogged down."

"What happens if we do?"

"Then we take the dirt bike."

"Oh, wonderful," she said sarcastically, looking at me sideways and curling her lip. "Why don't you know how to fly a helicopter?"

"One of those things I never learned to do."

"Do you suppose those two guys will stay out there to see if we make the switch?"

"Probably. I would if our roles were reversed. They'll want to grab it and scram as quickly as they can. I'm sure they are beginning to worry about the time element, especially if Calhoun is on their side. He knows were here by now."

"Think that will change their plans?"

"I don't know. Certainly it will put them on guard. They might have wondered about the flyover today, too. Not many planes fly over that area. The border patrol does once in awhile, looking for illegal aliens, but even they don't do it often. If they think that was us up there today, they may have an unpleasant welcome waiting for us."

"An ambush?" She poured two coffees and stirred in some creamer.

"Maybe, but they won't try anything radical as long as we have the generator for fear of damaging it."

"But if they suspect we saw them from the plane, they might try to get the generator before we even go out to the crash site. They'll know we're wise to the trick and there'll be no point in carrying it through. So what's to prevent

them from watching us and sneaking up in the middle of the night to take it from us?"

I sipped the coffee and looked out the window at the traffic along Imperial Avenue.

"Unless they catch us looking the other way, they won't try it because they won't want to risk damaging the generator in a shoot-out. It's just too valuable to them."

"Okay," she said skeptically, "but we have a week before we're supposed to be out there. What do we do in the meantime?"

"Empty the holding tanks, fill up with water, buy the food we'll need, and go set up camp like good tourists. We'll be far enough away that they won't be able to observe us." I hoped that was true. "I don't think they'll be too concerned if we are a couple of days early as long as we stay out of their way, which we will."

The lady from the Photo Lab walked out to the motor home and knocked on the door. I paid her for the pictures and went back to the table to see what we had. The scene looked very convincing. Broken and torn pieces of the cruise missile were scattered along a rut leading to the main fuselage partly buried in the sand. Brandy slid one of the pictures over to me and pointed to the back of the bobtailed truck.

"What's that thing?" she asked.

"That's a wind machine like special effects people use in the movies to create wind storms and hurricanes. They're probably going to use it to wipe out their footprints and tire tracks as they leave."

"Very thorough."

"Yes, indeed. They have to make it look convincing or they know we won't go in."

"Clever," she said. "Who's this?"

"Never saw him before," I answered, looking at the man she pointed to, "and I can't see the other guy's face. I think we should drive over to San Diego and see Dansforth this afternoon. I want to show him these pictures and find out if he can tell us who these two are. I'd like to know who I'm dealing with here."

"Maybe it's somebody from F.I.A."

"I don't know. Would they risk leaving the plant at such a critical time if they are part of the scheme?"

"Maybe they're just people who have been hired to put the missile out there without knowing why."

"That's the way I'd do it. Let's get on the computer and find out if Dansforth left any more information about the Cascade Generator that's supposed to be in the vault at F.I.A."

Brandy punched up the code and was soon getting a readout on the monitor. According to the information, Dansforth couldn't get into the vault without arousing suspicion, so he could neither verify nor deny that the engine was there. It didn't matter, however, since they were keeping everyone under surveillance. They would know if anyone made a move during that period of time the launch was supposed to take place.

I got the mobile operator and had

her patch me through to the number Dansforth had given me but a secretary told me he wasn't in. I helped Brandy put things away, then fired up the motor home and headed west for the big city.

THIRTEEN

6 :05 p.m., February eighth, 1985. La Mesa, California.

I heard on the radio that the King of Saudi Arabia was visiting the United States and wondered if some information had leaked about the Cascade Generator. Then to point out how unacceptable nuclear energy was as a source of power, New Zealand's government refused to allow any of our nuclear powered warships into its harbors, a decision which they had every right to assert. If it couldn't be resolved, I knew it would lead to a dissolution of our common defense treaty with New Zealand and other countries of the area. Production of the generator might appease the latter government, but it would destroy the former, and that was the paradox, the dilemma, the Cascade Generator created.

I knew it was after working hours, but I tried again to get Dansforth at his office. The secretary who answered said she didn't know him but would ask around, and after a minute on hold she came back to tell me Dansforth had not arrived but was expected within a day or two.

Dansforth told me he was flying to San Diego, his home base, to keep an eye on Templeton, and he should have arrived two days earlier. I called every number where I thought he might be but drew a blank. Dansforth had vanished and no one knew where he was. Enigmatic man, that Dansforth; just when we needed him most, he pulled a vanishing act. Brandy got on the computer to see if he had left any instructions and found we had been denied access to any further information. She tried to break in with a few tricks of her own but the super-mini in Washington was closed for business.

We began to wonder not only what had happened to Dansforth, but why we had been suddenly excluded from accessing the computer.

We spent the night in La Mesa and early the next morning I went to the Department of Motor Vehicles to check on the license plates of the vehicle out in the desert. When I got back to the motor home Brandy was sitting in front of the computer trying to extract some information. She handed me a sheet of paper on which she had copied some data.

"Our friend Calhoun doesn't work for Q-Tech Electronics,"' she said seriously. "Oh, they have a file on him, but it's a fake because there are no corresponding pay records or insurance and medical records. If I were to hazard a guess, I'd say he works for Spenser Halsey."

"How did you get that information? Are we back on the list?""No. I checked the phone numbers at Q-Tech, tried some variations, and got

into their computer's personnel files. Any good cracker can do it. My fifteen year old nephew taught me how:

She snapped her fingers. "So what did you find out about the truck?"

"Just as we figured:' I answered, sliding the DMV report over to her. "It's a rental and the name and address of the owner is fictitious. There's no way to tell who those two guys are. If we can ever find Dansforth maybe he can tell us."

Brandy folded the DMV report and filed it away, then turned back to me.

"So what do we do now, Richard?" she asked.

"We go to the desert, set up camp, and wait to see what happens while we keep an eye on the missile."

We battened everything down, and thirty minutes later we were out of the metropolitan traffic, climbing into the mountains near Alpine. We passed through some light fog at Pine Valley but, for the most part, the trip was uneventful. The chaparral and greasewood gave way to sage and ocotillo as we dropped down toward the desert at Mountain Springs Grade, and the temperature soared to ninety degrees. At Ocotillo Wells I turned onto State Road 80 and headed into the desert toward Plaster City and the road that would take us to our rendezvous with whomever was waiting out there.

The road just east of the Plaster City rail line was a smooth, hard packed, sandy single lane that wandered off between the sand hills separating the former National Parachute Test Range and the Navy's 103 Alpha Bombing Range. Mesquite, sage, chaparral, and cactus lined both sides of the road as far as the eye could see. Seven miles north of the highway we passed some Weapons Impact Scoring towers and ten miles farther we arrived at the southern base of Superstition Mountain where I stopped to study the maps again. I laid them out on the table and leaned over them.

"Well:' I said wearily, "it's Friday, so there will probably be a hundred dune buggies out here by late afternoon. If we stay here we'll be awake most of the night."

"Maybe we should stay here, Richard," Brandy said, looking up from the maps. "If there are other trailers and campers around us we won't be so conspicuous."

"If you've ever heard the noise of a hundred dirt bikes and as many dune buggies, and had to breathe the dirt and exhaust they stir up, you wouldn't want to stay here five minutes."

"Let's stay tonight, anyway. If we don't like it, we can always move somewhere else. What do you say?"

I agreed and found a place to park the coach away from the random tire tracks that crisscrossed the sand dunes at the base of the mountain. By four p.m. the weekenders began to arrive with their campers, travel trailers, motor homes, dune buggies, and motorcycles. By six p.m. we were surrounded by nearly a hundred vehicles and about three hundred people. Each camp had its own stereo, each tuned to a different station from the one next to it, and each cranked up to maximum volume. There were at least a hundred yelling kids, a dozen cats, and fifty yapping, stinking

dogs.

I put my knuckles against my lips and looked at Brandy from under my eyebrows. She was standing at the door watching the circus with incredulous disbelief as fires were started and the beer and food was yanked out of coolers and set to cooking. Motorcycles and dune buggies roared up and down the makeshift road leaving plumes of whirling dust and smoke, echoes of riotous laughter, and whoops of insane glee. She turned to me with her eyes wide.

"How can they think with all that noise?" she asked above the din.

"They don't come here to think; they come here to forget. This is how they work off the stress and frustration of last week. They come out here for two days to attack and punish that mountain with their machines so they can face next week's mundane chores. This is what they call fun."

She was standing there watching it all with an amused smile when a lean, brown youngster ambled up to the door and asked if we were going to enter the dirt bike races the next day. I leaned sideways to get a better look and saw a blond haired kid with piercing blue eyes dressed in a pair of jeans and motocross boots with a hoorah rag tied around his head. Rivulets of sweat ran down his deeply tanned bare chest and back, making trails through the dust that had settled on him. We chatted casually with him for a few minutes until he decided he wanted another can of beer, then he scuffed away, leaving a vortex of dust in his wake.

"Is that the same guy we saw out there in the desert?" she asked.

"One of them, so they know we're here. I imagine they'll keep a close watch on us until this thing is finished."

I sat back and relaxed, and Brandy closed the door and came over to sit beside me. I put my arm around her and she lay her head against my shoulder, watching the frantic activity through the now dusty window. I knew she was thinking about our visitor even before she spoke.

"What do you suppose he wanted?" she asked softly.

"He was sizing us up, getting a look at us so he'd recognize us when we show up out there."

"But if they think we're onto their game, won't they try to get the generator before we even take it out there?"

"I don't think so. I believe they'll wait until we take it out to the missile, because it will be easier to get it there than it would be with all these people around. Anyway, I don't think they suspect anything or he wouldn't have walked up to talk to us."

I knew better but I didn't want her to have to worry about some idiot crashing through the door with a pistol in his hand and mayhem on his mind.

"Where do you suppose his partner is?"

"Oh, you can bet he's out there watching us. I'll get the dirt bike off the back tomorrow and roam around. Maybe I'll be able to spot them."

Brandy eased out of the booth and prepared a light meal while I tried to

contact Dansforth. I gave up after the fourth number. He knew where we were and how to contact us, so I decided to wait until he called. It was dark by the time we had finished eating and we sat by the window with the lights out to watch the crazies run their dune buggies up and down the mountain.

Their headlights would disappear behind a sand dune, then reappear a little higher, flashing like beacons as they stabbed the night. The sounds of the engines were far away and muted by the vastness of the open desert, and most of the people still in their camps had settled down to a kind of quiet, huddled closeness as if their nearness to one another kept the gremlins and goblins away. They squatted or sat around their separate fires, discussing the differences between Corvair engines and Volkswagen engines, transaxles, tire sizes and air pressures, fuel mixtures and safety equipment.

The dune buggies came back singly or in pairs as it got colder, and the fires died down to glowing embers. Slowly, as if they hated to give up the moment, people began to wander into their campers and trailers, and by midnight all but a few diehards had surrendered the night to the desert foxes.

The stars burned like distant electric blue fires in the dark heavens and there seemed a million more to see than one could observe through the smog and incident light of the cities. The sky was vast, full and trembling with energy, and as I stared at the endless cosmos I suddenly felt very small and insignificant. Brandy shivered and pulled a jacket around her shoulders as we sat there in the darkness, close together, and watched worlds move imperceptibly through the void.

"Someday," I said, "maybe in our lifetimes now, people we know will climb aboard great ships and disappear forever out there among the stars. Entire families will be born to live and die on those ships without ever once stepping foot on another planet just so they can bear and raise children who will someday inherit those far away dream worlds."

"That's almost scary. I wouldn't want to go." She looked up at me. "Would you go?"

"When I was a kid," I said, thinking about it for awhile, "I thought of little else but now, well, I don't know. If there was a possibility of reaching a destination before I died I might go if you were with me, but I don't think I'd want to go knowing the ship would never arrive in my lifetime. It isn't a trip for older people who have strong foundations here on earth. It will be for the young and brave, the strong and foolish dreamers to give it a try."

"People without beautiful memories to look back on as they grow older."

"Yeah."

Brandy flicked on a light and got up to pour two cups of coffee, then brought them back to the table and sat down. She watched the creamer swirl in the cup for awhile, then looked at me.

"The Cascade Generator will give them that chance, won't it, Richard?" she asked seriously.

"Yes, if some fool doesn't use it to destroy the world."

"And how do we know the people we're going to give it to won't do that very thing? We don't know what they're going to use it for, Richard. Maybe the other people, Templeton and Calhoun, maybe they're the ones who want to use it to explore the universe. Wouldn't it be terrible if we gave it back to Future Industries and they used it for nothing more than a war machine?" She picked at her fingernails nervously with her brow furrowed in deep thought.

"We really don't know anything about Calhoun and Templeton except what Dansforth and the computer told us and that may be lies, but we do know F.I.A. is a government financed think tank. All you've talked about is how terrible it would be if some hostile foreign government got their hands on the generator. Well, all governments are hostile to one another once in awhile. Look what's happening between the United States and New Zealand right now.

"They're supposed to be our allies, Richard, but if we aren't being hostile toward each other then there's no definition of the term. Imagine how much more serious it could be if someone used the generator as leverage."

I patted her hand and gave her a grim smile. "I have thought about it, sweetheart, ever since I found out what that thing is, but I have to admit I can't offer a solution to the problem. As far as I can see, the only thing we can do is return it to Future Industries and hope they have the common sense to use it for some humanitarian purpose."

"Even if it means killing somebody?"

I flinched. "I didn't make the rules for this game, Brandy."

She was quiet for awhile, staring into her coffee cup as if the answer might be read there.

"You don't trust anyone, that's your problem."

I had a sip of the hot coffee and studied her for a moment. She seemed unusually agitated and preoccupied.

"I don't see it as a problem," I replied softly, "but you're right; I don't trust anyone."

She put her hand over mine and squeezed tightly.

"When you talked about this last week you told me you believed Roger had taken the generator because he might have wanted to prevent other people from misusing it. Well, how do you know he didn't? Where is Roger right now? We haven't heard a word about him since that incident with Husky in the forest.

"What have they done with him, and where is Dansforth right now? As soon as you told him what you were going to do about switching the generator he disappeared, and as soon as we began to get clear, usable information out of the computer, they cut us off.

"Call it intuition if you want, but something tells me we're going to give that thing back to the wrong people."

"You really believe that, don't you?"

"Yes, Richard, I really do." She fell

silent and stared at her hands.

When I thought about it, I had to admit her idea had merit simply because it explained why we had the real generator. But that meant either Halsey or Dansforth, or both of them, had to be in on the deception. It also explained the rather elaborate ruse to get control of the generator. I had already realized there would be no place on earth for anyone to hide if they succeeded in stealing the engine, but what about a hiding place on another planet?

The manual clearly stated that the generator could accelerate a mass to, or beyond, the speed of light, so it would be possible for a crew of a space ship to reach a distant solar system within their lifetimes. The other technology, life support systems, food production, space medicine, and others, already existed. Hell, that's what the space program was all about.

Templeton could have used his stolen money to build a ship, and what if someone discovered it was counterfeit after he was a zillion miles from Earth?

Calhoun? Probably just a watchdog like the kid we had just talked to. The kid was a perfect candidate for a journey to the stars, him and other young men and women like him. What about Halsey and Dansforth? And where did Roger fit into the plan? Why did Dansforth hand me the generator and send us all the way out here when he could have handed it to whomever he wanted to have it?

I rubbed my eyes and tried to stretch the stiffness out of my back and shoulders. "It's too late to think about all this tonight, Brandy," I said wearily. "Let's get some sleep and maybe we'll have a new perspective on it tomorrow."

"But can you understand what I'm saying?"

"Yes, it makes sense in many ways, but it's too fantastic, too incredible to be real. How could anyone hide a spaceship?"

"What, small enough for a dozen people? Look at that engine back there: you can hold it in one hand. Without fuel tanks and boosters and all the hardware and junk that a rocket requires these days, how big would a spaceship have to be?"

"Not very big, I guess."

She looked at me very intently for a moment, gauging my attitude .

"That Space Shuttle, the one they call Enterprise, where did they just take it?"

"Right up the road; Edwards Air Force Base. But it's a prototype, used for training and troubleshooting; it isn't an active ship, and may not even be spaceworthy."

"Who says?"

Who indeed? I sat bolt upright. All these things, happening at the same time, pointed to the very plausible possibility that Brandy might be right. It was so incredible it might actually work. If the Enterprise was more than a test-bed, it most certainly had to be their spaceship. The delay in time, this extra four or five days, might be what they needed to prepare it for the trip and would explain why they didn't want us here be-

fore the test date.

They had to wait until NASA moved it out to Edwards Air Force Base!

Now, food would have to be put aboard, medicine, clothing, weapons, books, and a hundred other things I couldn't even imagine. If they used the cargo bays for crews quarters and the fuel sections for stowing what they needed, they could probably take a dozen people on the journey, just as Brandy had stated.

I tried to imaging their hardships and didn't envy them at all.

"What do you think, Richard?"

"I think we'd better find out who the good guys are and who the bad guys are. Just because a bunch of adventurous fools might be planning a trip to the stars, that doesn't necessarily make them the good guys. They could still be trying to steal the generator to use as a weapon, see?"

She shook her head and sighed with exasperation. "Okay," she said, "let's get some sleep and talk about it in the morning."

She went into the bathroom to freshen up, then crawled into bed, and ten minutes later I eased in beside her. She turned toward me and put her arms around me.

"I'm still awake," she whispered and pressed against me, trembling.

"I feel like we're going to change the world, Richard," she said softly. "Do you think one or two people can do that; change the course of history?"

"Sure. Almost all of history, unusual events, incredible feats, can be traced back to a single person, or a small group of people. The discovery of America, cures for terrible diseases, religious revelations, technological advances, all those things were the ideas and plans in the minds of just a few people.

"A perfect example would be a young Jewish rabbi named Yeshua, whom we know as Jesus, who tried to tell his fellow countrymen they didn't need the high priests to intervene for them when they wanted to talk to God. He changed history for all time.

"Most other people are too busy trying to figure out how they're going to feed themselves to worry about how to do it better or easier."

"If we find out that Templeton, Calhoun, Roger, and some of the others are really going to try to make it to another planet, will you let them go?"

I thought about it for awhile.

"Yeah. I'll even help them."

She was quiet for a long time and I thought she had fallen asleep, but she stirred slightly and put her lips against mine tenderly.

"Richard?"

"Umm?"

"We won't go with them, will we?"

FOURTEEN

Most of our lives revolve around one or two really critical events and how we react to those events. No one ever knows if they are making the correct decisions until it's too late to do anything about it. While I waited for Dansforth and Husky by the lake I had wished I

could have expanded my perception to see that far away future day when the Cascade Generator would be used to help humankind pave the way to the stars.

My decision the next day could have decided the fate of humankind for centuries and that bore heavily into my mind. If I could have seen the results of my decision, I might have been able to respond in a way that would positively have been for the good of humankind; it would have been a sure thing with no guesswork.

But I couldn't project myself and my actions into a future day; I could only do what I thought best for the generations of people living in the world at that very moment. When I woke up Saturday morning I still hadn't figured out who all the actors were or what they were up to, but I planned on riding the motorcycle around the area to find out who was there.

I didn't get the chance.

While we were having breakfast, the blond haired kid opened the door and stepped into the motor home. He had a .357 pointed directly at the spot between my eyes. He held up one hand and motioned for us to remain seated.

"Please, folks," he said firmly, "put your hands where I can see them.

We did that. He moved into a position behind Brandy so he could kill us both with one shot if he had to.

"Ma'am, I want you to stand up and turn around slowly."

Brandy stood and he patted her down, looking for weapons, then told her to sit.

"Now you."

I got the same treatment, then he motioned for us to go forward to the driver's and passenger's seats, stepping back as we went around him. He moved in behind us and motioned for us to sit. I got to drive. Half a minute later another motor home pulled along side and I could hear a muted discussion outside, then felt the motor home sway as more passengers came aboard. I glanced in the rearview mirror.

One of our passengers was Calhoun. "I'll take it from here, Michael," he said with a smooth southern drawl as he moved forward to take the position behind us. He was carrying an Uzi KG-99 automatic pistol.

Calhoun was about six feet tall, had red hair, brown eyes, was trim and muscular, had gentle eyes and the hands of a pianist. He was dressed in black slacks, white shirt, and black low cut oxfords. Not your average agency man.

Brandy and I sat quietly while Calhoun rested the Uzi on my right shoulder, and Michael made his way to the computer. After about two minutes he came forward and handed Calhoun a slip of paper.

"They're ready, sir," he said.

Calhoun tapped my shoulder with the piece. "Stay behind that motor home and don't do anything stupid."

I eased the rig out onto the road and fell in behind the other motor home as we bounced the seventeen miles back to the highway. We turned left on State Road 80 and drove about fifteen miles

to Forrester Road where we turned left again and headed north at fifty miles an hour.

I could hear Michael alternately talking to the other passenger, whom I had not seen, and someone on the radio. At Westmoreland we turned left again and headed north on Highway 86 along the western side of the Salton Sea. I had a pretty good idea where we were going.

Brandy trembled, shaken and frightened, and I started to reach over to reassure her with a touch but Calhoun pressed the Uzi against my neck.

"We don't have much farther to go, Mrs. Constable," he said gently, "please try to bear up the best you can."

She closed her eyes and nodded.

Michael and the other passenger filched around in the closets and I could see in the mirror they had taken the generator from its box. Pretty soon he walked forward and whispered something to Calhoun, who nodded and smiled.

"I see you've discovered our secret, Mister Constable. No need to respond."

We drove on in silence until we reached a lay-by just north of Salton City. I followed the other motor home in and parked behind it, then waited for Calhoun to issue the next instructions.

We waited. No one spoke, no one moved for ten minutes while Calhoun rested the pistol on my shoulder. Suddenly a helicopter swept into view above the rocky hill and circled down to a landing in front of the lead motor home, throwing clouds of dust and debris into the air. The doors opened as soon as the skids hit the ground and four people, two men and two women, ducked out and ran for the motor home I was driving, then the helicopter lifted off again and was gone before they reached the door.

One of the men was Roger Bentley.

"Come to the back, please," Calhoun said, tapping me with the pistol and backing away.

The four people from the helicopter were coming in the door as we were sitting at the table. Michael slid behind the wheel and a willowy blond girl, dressed in shorts, halter, and ragged sneakers, got into the passenger seat. Calhoun sat at the computer console and kept the KG-99 pointed in our general direction.

Roger got into the seat opposite us, brushed the sand and dust from his face and dishevelled hair, pushed his glasses up on his nose, and shrugged.

"Hell of a way to have to meet again, I guess," he said with an apologetic grin as he held out his hand. I grasped the strong, tanned hand and squeezed a little harder than I should have.

"What the unholy hell is going on here?" I growled through clenched teeth. I jerked my head toward Calhoun and Roger made a motion for him to put the pistol away.

"They don't know what you're going to do, Rich. They're afraid you're going to destroy the generator."

"Well, then, maybe they're justified, because I gave it a lot of thought."

The bus lurched forward and we pulled out onto the highway again. Roger introduced the other passengers

as Gillian, his lady friend, and Judson Templeton and his wife, Beth, then began to explain everything that had happened in the last month.

"That satellite up there, the Morningstar, that's ours. It has a food processing plant and communications devices aboard it. We are going to retrieve it and take it with " He paused and looked at me quizzically. "You do know what we're going to do, don't you?" He shot a quick glance at Calhoun as if he were afraid he'd said something he shouldn't have.

"Brandy figures you're going to capture the Space Shuttle parked up at Edwards and head off into the great black void."

"Oh, man," he said, shaking his head, "you nearly ruined months of planning when you opened that generator and found out it was real. We've had things planned for years, even before the generator was perfected, and when Steve Dansforth showed up at Future Industries a couple days ago and told us you'd discovered you had the real generator, we had to change our whole game plan.

"When Brandy began extracting all that information from the computer Dansforth knew that you were up to something we might not be able to stop, so he devised this trick to keep you from blowing the lid off the operation."

"Dansforth has planned all this, hasn't he?"

"From the beginning."

"Why didn't someone just tell us what was going on?"

"Because we didn't know what you would do," Templeton answered. "If you had known what we were going to do and told just one wrong person, it would have been disastrous. At this point, any further delay would have ruined our plans."

He coughed nervously, patting his balding head with a white handkerchief. "David Husky nearly did that last month."

"What part did he play in all this?" I asked.

"He was part of the project from the outset, but he got greedy or someone got to him," Calhoun explained as he eased up to the table. "No telling what would have happened if he had succeeded in getting it out of the country."

I turned to Roger. "You say Dansforth has been in on this from the beginning? Where is he now?"

"Waiting for us up at Edwards. He recognized the dangers of the generator years ago, before it was even tested, just as you did, just as all of us here did. He has tried to help us get it out of Future Industries for almost three years, ever since the first successful tests were concluded.

"Our narrow escape from Husky made us realize just how close we are to losing the generator to a foreign government, and NASA's decision to move the Enterprise to Edwards gave us the chance we needed to escape.

"To tell you the truth, most of the people at the project really didn't know anyone else even knew about the engine, least of all a foreign government.

They thought it was the most closely guarded secret in history. At any rate, I guess you can see why we had to stop the project and destroy any... ."

"How many generators do you have?" I interrupted.

There was an awkward silence while everybody looked at everybody else.

"Two," Calhoun said finally. "This one here and the one powering the Morningstar."

"Why did someone tell me the Soviets had developed their own version of the engine?"

"Well," Roger said, "they're experimenting with an engine based on similar principles, but it utilizes a consumable core. It's actually less efficient than a solid or liquid fuel engine. I imagine they would consider this one as nothing less than black magic."

"If Husky had got this one out of the country," Templeton added, "the Soviets would have paid him an enormous price for it."

"Why does everyone assume the Russians were on the receiving end of the theft?" I asked. "I would have put my money on one of the oil producing countries as the buyers. I don't think the Soviets are so uncivilized that they wouldn't also recognize the generator's dangers, and if they were the ultimate buyers, I think they would be inclined to bury it just as we are doing. Some of the oil producing countries, on the other hand... ."

Brandy gave me a puzzled look and interrupted with a question of her own.

"What was that elaborate set up in the desert supposed to accomplish?" she asked Roger.

"Ah, that," he sighed. "We had to think of a way to get the generator out of the plant without arousing suspicion, I mean, they had to believe it was going out for a legitimate test so they wouldn't suspect we had it, and Steve thought if we made the scheme complicated enough no one would figure it out."

"We knew you had been a Range Controller," Calhoun said, "but we hoped you would just accept the suggestion that the test was going to take place without really questioning it. When you called Dansforth and told him why you thought it was a bunch of baloney, we knew we had underestimated you. We actually had a test scheduled for a Tomahawk, in case you called China Lake, but cancelled it after we realized you weren't buying our scam."

I shook my head for awhile.

"It seems like a lot of trouble to go through to get back something you already had."

"It is," Roger said, "but everyone had to be convinced you didn't have the real generator, especially Spenser Halsey. He's the one who actually carried it out of the plant."

"Unknowingly, of course," Templeton added.

"Where does he fit into this?" Brandy asked.

"He doesn't. When he discovers he's been used and we have the real generator, he'll come after it," Roger explained. "If he doesn't get it back, he may be ruined."

We sat quietly for awhile and watched the desert slip past beneath a cloudless blue sky. At Indio the caravan turned west on Interstate 10 and we were buffeted by the winds that sweep into the valley south of the Little San Bernardino Mountains between Palm Springs and Banning. The women went to the back of the coach and got comfortable while Calhoun and Templeton went forward to talk to Michael and the girl. Roger and I remained at the table to talk.

"It's difficult for me to believe you're really going to try this," I said, shaking my head.

"Not try, Richard, we're going to do it. We are. It's the only thing we can do. We can't destroy the generator and we couldn't hope to steal it and hide anywhere on this planet. Sooner or later we would be found.

"The Cascade Generator is a terrible machine; the world isn't ready for it. And we can't let it fall into the hands of someone who would use it as a cudgel."

"And they would, of course."

"Of course," Roger nodded solemnly with his lips pursed. "The first thing they did was put it into a cruise missile. That told us right there what they would use it for. That's when we decided to get our satellite launched." He chuckled nervously. "A lot of things have happened lately to move our schedule ahead."

"What will prevent Future Industries or someone else from going ahead with the development of the generator after you're gone? I can't believe the government will just write this one off as a bad debt without trying to reactivate the project."

"Let them. There are absolutely no records, manuals, or descriptions remaining to explain how to construct another one. Everyone who was involved in the project is on one of these two coaches, and we are all going to be aboard the Shuttle by this evening. If they work real hard, and if they're really lucky, they may begin to understand the principle of the engine in a century or two, but no one in our lifetimes will build one."

I raised an eyebrow. "You don't think someone might accidently figure it out before then?"

"Redevelop the entire package? No. As simple as the engine seems, it really is extremely complicated new technology, and has taken nearly twenty years of very expensive and intensive research to develop. And this is but a mere toy to what we could have created. But it isn't technology someone will discover accidentally.

"No, Richard, when we go, the entire knowledge of the Cascade Generator goes with us. Know what I mean?"

I nodded. Yeah, I sure knew what he was talking about, but I had an empty feeling in my stomach like I just found out someone stole the pyramids of Egypt. It seemed like an awful lot of knowledge to throw away.

I shook the dread away and grinned at him. "Where are you going; what're you going to do when you get there?"

"We have a destination in mind, about six years away, where, if there is a habitable planet, we hope to establish a new society and a new order where this kind of foolishness won't have to happen."

"Humankind's age-old dream of Utopia."

"Maybe, but what's wrong with that? Just because we haven't achieved it yet doesn't mean we should quit trying, does it?"

"Naw," I agreed. "It doesn't hurt to keep searching." I wanted to believe it, but knew I didn't sound convincing, and I didn't want to remind them we'd come too far out of the forest to ever go back.

"So. Is there a specific planet you expect to find out there?"

"Not really. But there must be at least one, just one, where human life can exist, don't you think?"

"At least one," I said quietly.

"It may be a primitive existence, living off the land, no sanitation facilities except what we will have aboard the ship; no food except what we can process aboard the Morningstar.

"But in time, in time, we will begin farming and manufacturing our own clothing. We will construct buildings and communities, and raise children. Perhaps we may even see the raising of cities in our own lifetimes."

He fell silent, began cleaning his glasses with trembling hands. The pep talk was for himself.

I didn't have the heart to ask him where he thought he would get a new part when the toilet broke.

"Once we leave," he continued, "we'll be committed, you know. At the speed of light, well, the theory is that time changes for people aboard a spaceship traveling at, or near, or beyond the speed of light. A period of a few months to us may translate to hundreds of years on Earth. We can never come back to the same world we will leave. We can never come back."

His voice trailed away and he sat quietly for awhile, then shrugged away the thought and changed the subject.

For the next two hours we talked about Mexico, and old friends, and surfsailing as the caravan rolled along the highway toward Edwards Air Force Base and their final look at the world that had spawned them. I could hear Mrs. Templeton and Gillian telling Brandy the same details I had heard from Roger.

The older lady was apprehensive about the trip and kept worrying about G forces and space sickness, and Gillian, who was enthusiastic and thrilled by the idea, had to keep reminding her there would be no G forces; they would leave the runway with less force than the acceleration of an automobile.

To Gillian it was an adventure greater than any other. Her specialty was hydroponics and organic gardening, and she expounded theories and facts like an encyclopedia.

Somehow, I just couldn't share her enthusiasm, and I couldn't help feeling they were somehow trying to pass on all the knowledge they possessed in case it all died out there in the nothingness between the now and the then. Brandy

could only sit with raised eyebrows as Gillian rambled on and on. I hoped silently that all their dreams would come true.

At 3:30 p.m. we rolled through the gate at the perimeter fence surrounding the stand-down area, and after all our passes were checked by the sentry we proceeded toward a group of buildings near the runway. I had only seen pictures of the Shuttle and was surprised at its size and quilted appearance of its lower surfaces. Somehow I had expected it to be smaller and smoother than it was, more like a jet fighter. It sat apart from the buildings in the shimmering heat waves rising from the desert floor, and half a dozen men were standing in a cluster under the port wing.

"We're here to install some computer components as far as they're concerned, so don't mention the generator while they're around," Roger whispered.

I nodded and looked back at Brandy who had been given the same instructions.

"Is that ship space worthy?" I asked.

"Perfectly, perfectly."

Roger was tense and nervous. He got up from the table and walked to the door as the bus rolled to a stop in the shade of a hangar. Michael and his companion went into the bathroom to wash and change clothes while the rest of us stepped out into the heat of the Southern California desert.

Dansforth was there to greet us, and he led us quickly to an air-conditioned office where people from the other coach were already assembled. He gave me a smile and shook hands with me, then addressed the others.

"Michael and Roger will install the components in about ten minutes," he said. "The ground crews and Security Guards have been instructed to remain away from the area because of the classified nature of the equipment so we won't have to worry about them.

"During the thirty minutes it takes to position the generator everyone should board the ship as unobtrusively as possible. Most of your gear has already been stowed in containers disguised as normal spacecraft paraphernalia."

He looked around the room.

"Does everyone have their instructions? Everyone know their station? Everyone know their berthing space?

"Okay, in about ten minutes the guards will arrive to accompany Roger and Michael to the ship with the generator. After that, you should begin to enter the ship singly or in pairs.

"Time your entry so it doesn't look like a stampede; we don't want to attract any attention. Lift-off is scheduled for five p.m. Any questions?"

There were none.

"Good. I have to leave you now to attend to some details elsewhere so I won't be seeing you again."

Understatement of the year, I thought.

He walked around the group shaking hands and wishing them well. Obviously he wasn't going with them and I wondered why.

Roger came over to where Brandy

and I were standing near the door. He appeared excited but grim.

"There's room for you if you want to come," he said with a nervous smile.

I held up my hands. "No, no, no," I said quickly. "I think we'll stay here and cover your tracks. I couldn't stand being locked up in that thing for the next six years."

Brandy swallowed away the dryness in her throat and embraced him with tears in her eyes.

"You're crazy, but I wish you luck. Remember that we love you," she said emotionally.

I shook his hand and embraced him warmly. "Send us a postcard and let us know what you're doing," I said.

As I stepped back he held my hand tightly as if he hated to let go. His lips were pursed tightly against his teeth and his eyes were wide with fear.

"I'm really glad you're not going," he nodded, then turned and walked back to the group.

After a few minutes Michael entered the room pushing the Mark Seven on a wheeled cart. The two guards were waiting at the door. There were some quick smiles and low whispering, then Roger and Michael followed the guards across the tarmac to the ship. We watched as they carried the box up the boarding ladder and disappeared into the hatch.

"I believe that's the last we'll see of him," Brandy said softly.

At ten minutes until five we were standing beside the road near the perimeter fence outside the base with Calhoun and Dansforth. Nobody could think of anything to say so we all leaned on the fence and watched the gleaming white spaceship shimmering in the distance. It looked like a toy from where we stood and it was difficult to believe that ten people, five men and five women, were sitting in it, waiting for the ship to rise from the desert heat to begin a voyage to the stars. I had my arm around Brandy and she leaned against me with an easy grace, her arms folded across her chest, refusing to take her eyes from the tiny white dot in the desert.

Dansforth and Calhoun took turns checking their watches and looking up and down the road. They both looked grim and ill-at-ease.

"You have something on your mind, Dansforth," I said, "Want to share it with us?"

"No, I don't. Not right now, anyhow." His face was drawn, and his eyes were empty and flat and void of emotion. I had a pretty good idea what was wrong.

I pulled away from Brandy and walked over to talk to them. Calhoun turned away, moved off a few yards, leaned on the fence, and put his forehead on his arm. Dansforth held his mouth tight, breathing with quick, irregular gasps, and tried to avoid looking at me.

Dansforth, the paragon of indifference, was weeping.

"Well," I said presently, "I kind of figured they weren't going to make it. What are their chances?"

Dansforth looked at me sideways for

an instant, then looked back toward the ship. He inhaled deeply, pursed his lips, and puffed. "One in a million. One in ten million. Zero. The crazy, dumb bastards aren't prepared to get as far as Sacramento, for Christ's sake."

I leaned back on the fence, folded my arms across my chest, and closed my eyes for half a minute.

"Then why are they going?"

"Can't you guess?"

"To keep the secret of the Cascade Generator from falling inter the hands of someone who would use it to destroy humankind."

"That's about it." I started to walk away, but he held my arm, and stared at me with sad, lifeless eyes. "I'm glad you didn't go with them, Richard," he said. "Everyone expected you to, you know."

"Yeah, I've thought about that, but I'm not some Faustian nut willing to sacrifice my life to preserve some universal secret, no matter how great it is. I knew, when I talked to Roger on the bus, that all this was a dead end road, but I figured they just might get somewhere, someday, and everything would be okay."

"You going to tell Brandy?"

"No. I'll let her believe they... ."

Calhoun tapped Dansforth on the arm. "Time," he said simply.

I walked back to Brandy, put my arm around her waist, and watched the tiny white ship rise from the desert floor, straight up for about six hundred feet, then sail off toward the east, gaining altitude until it was out of sight. No fire, no flames, no ear-splitting noise. Like a piece of angel hair, it simply blew away into the darkening sky.

Brandy turned to me, weeping, and put her head against my shoulder. "They'll be okay, Peach, don't worry," I lied, hoping she would accept it as truth.

Calhoun pushed away from the fence and headed for their motor home. "The meanest people in California are going to descend on us like the wrath of God if we don't get going," he said shakily.

Dansforth walked over to us and held out a large white envelope. "This is for you and Brandy," he said.

"What is it?"

"A just compensation for your trouble. Enough to keep you on the road and out of sight for a few months. Go on your honeymoon, now. God knows you rate one after all this." He shook my hand and backed away.

"What're you going to do?" I asked.

"Same thing I've always done." He shrugged.

We could hear sirens in the distance, and saw security vehicles racing across the desert with red lights flashing. Calhoun leaned on the horn, beckoning Dansforth to hurry.

"We'd better get moving," Dansforth said, as he shoved the envelope into my hand. "Take care of yourself, and give me a call when you get back to San Diego so I can pick up the motor home."

He trotted to join Calhoun, paused at the door to point a cocked finger at us. "I'll be seeing you guys," he said with false confidence.

They pulled out onto the highway, and we watched until they were out of sight. Brandy turned to me, palming the tears from her eyes.

"Should we have gone with them, Richard?"

"No, Peach," I answered, leading her to the motor home. "We belong here because we have no worthwhile dreams among the stars, only sweet memories of Earth and of each other. Someday, perhaps, when the world is a different place."

I paused, reached out to pull her to me, and embraced her frantically.

"I love you, Brandy," I said against her cheek. "You've made life worth living again after so many years of frustration and loneliness. Let's be happy with that, and not think of Roger and the others."

We buckled in, I started the engine, and pulled out onto the highway, heading north into the high desert.

I'd wanted to tell her, explain what terrible sacrifices Roger and the others were making just to keep the knowledge of their creation from destroying the world, but my will failed me. I couldn't tell her. Not just yet, at any rate.

The past four or five decades had proven, if nothing else, that humankind can find the will, strength, knowledge, and resources to make manifest nearly any machine they can conjure up from the deep wells of their minds. But how many times had a scientist or engineer wished he had never told anyone about his dream?

How many agonized, in the silent, lonely nights, wishing they could take back a hideous machine out there leveling cities and maiming thousands of innocents? Roger and his colleagues knew they could never take back the Cascade Generator, could never undo what they had already done, could never destroy it and remain free from the will of evil men, could never put it back in the box and forget it existed. They couldn't wish it or will it gone, so they had gathered it up and took it to a place where it, and they, would never be found.

They had dreamed of releasing humankind from their drudgery, their slavery, their unceasing service to mindless machines, and it had cost them their freedom, their fortunes, and now, possibly, their lives.

They had dreamed of paradise and opened the door only to discover a vision of hell.

I drove to the end of a farm road just south of Coso Junction as the light was failing and, after showering, we fell into bed, completely exhausted. I lay with my hands under my head until I could hear Brandy purring with contented regularity, then slipped out of bed and went to the dinette, where I sat for hours staring out at the billion shining suns in the far fields of space.

Somewhere out there, invisible against the background of molten stars hanging in the endless void, were ten fragile human beings, clinging to life in a metal and ceramic cocoon, flung into the cosmos at the speed of light with Roger's fantastic engine.

Five hours had passed since the tiny ship had drifted away into the evening sky above Edwards Air Force Base, and I tried to imagine how far they had gone since five o'clock. If they had accelerated to the speed of light shortly after they left the atmosphere, they might be nearly three and a half billion miles from the oasis that had given them life and would be nearing the edge of the known solar system.

Beyond that was a black emptiness that would consume six years of their lives, if they survived that long, if they were not crushed by the unendurable length of their journey, if they did not all die from sheer boredom before they arrived at their unknown destination.

Maybe Dansforth had been too pessimistic about their venture. Roger was, if nothing else, a cautious and calculating person and, if he'd had the intelligence to create his engine, he, or one of the others, had the ability to find the Utopia they so dearly sought.

We could live without the engine, and never miss it, but I suddenly realized, with acute clarity, as I stared into the endless, inscrutable, empty blackness, that it's good friends, longtime friends, people who have shared the tears and terror, shared the laughter and the loving, the joy and the dream, the sheer ecstacy of life itself, people like Roger, and Brandy, even Dansforth and Calhoun, that make life worth living, make the heartaches and misery worth enduring, make any sacrifice worthwhile.

I chanted some words that were as close as I could get to prayer, and crept back to bed, slipped beneath the covers gently so I wouldn't wake Brandy, and fell asleep, knowing that all things were as they should be, knowing the universe was proceeding toward some vast, unknowable end, unhampered and unchanged by the hand of humankind.

We're the dinosaurs, I thought, as I drifted away to sleep. The flotsam and jetsam... .